

## Stereotypes and Paranoia in America Post 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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### ABSTRACT

Among the many complications that the 9/11 attacks brought to the world is task of enhancing the distorted image of Arabs and Muslims in the Western World. This image has exposed the Arab diaspora in the West to new and growing forms of threats and convolutions. The American excessive sense of paranoia following the 9/11 disaster has created an unjustified fear and hatred towards Arabs and Muslims who play important roles in the American society. This has increased the number of Arab writers who have taken on the responsibility of representing a positive image of Arabs by expressing their desire to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world. One of these writers who dedicated her fiction to demand a drastic change in depicting Arabs as other than terrorists is the Arab-American novelist, Laila Halaby. This paper attempts to show how Halaby employs her narrative, *Once in a Promised Land*, in order to present the majority of Arabs and Muslims as victims of stereotyping and by shedding light on the distorted image of Muslims and Arabs in Post 9/11 America. Also, the paper focuses on Halaby's employment of embedded texts and folktales by means of creating a mixture of truths and lies to reflect the reality of stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Arab Diaspora, Stereotypes, Islamophobia, Metafiction, Narratology.

### 1. Introduction: Islamophobia, xenophobia, and stereotypes in the American Society

Much has been said and written about the impact of 9/11 attacks on Arabs and Muslims in the past two decades, but Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) stands out to be one of the most intriguing narratives that treats the political, social, and economic consequences of this catastrophe on the Arab and Muslim diaspora. Like many Arab intellectuals, Halaby is aware of the severe Western attacks on Arabs and Muslims not only post 9/11, but also prior to the attacks on The World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Apparently, Halaby's sense of responsibility towards Arabs and Muslims urges her to tackle and clarify some of the misconceptions and stereotypes that haunt her people. Her positioning as an Arab-American deems her a strong representative of modern day Arabs and Muslims, since she addresses major issues concerning the image of Arabs by taking advantage of her long residency in America; an opportunity which gives her a firsthand experience with different reactions of the American society. She in fact conforms to Edward Said's category of the postcolonial intellectual in *Culture and Imperialism* as the modern intellectual who exists simultaneously inside and outside the dominant regime and understands both sides of the imperial divide. She, like other Arab intellectuals, "[belongs] to more than one history and more than one group" (1994, xxvii). Halaby, basically, takes the postcolonial intellectual's role as she "writes back" to the White man and portrays a more realistic image of Arab individuals' struggle in the Western world. With great awareness and sense of cultural responsibility, Halaby among other Arab American writers aptly follows Aziz's advice in her Foreword to Darraj's *Scheherazade's legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004, xiii) to write the Arab diaspora's experience in America instead of allowing it to be written by American mainstream writers. Drawing on Aziz's idea, it is apparent that Halaby is fully aware that "the official history is a great lie written by the conquerors and the rulers"

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(Abdelhadi 2007, 4). Hence, her version of the events finds more resonance and credibility among Arab and Muslim readers than those written by western writers.

The amalgam of reality and imagination Halaby creates in her text reflects the true nature of stereotypes and their contaminating relation to truth. Halaby's novel reveals a preoccupation with stereotypes in a dual sense: the destructive effects of stereotyping on both the American society and other minorities in America and the generic hybridity of truth and lies as main constituents of "stereotypes."

Halaby in *Once in a Promised Land* introduces a new form of discrimination in the American society. The American characters in the novel are presented as racist because they fear others and not because they feel superior to other races and ethnicities. Being oblivious to and perhaps disinterested with political conflicts and the deterioration of peace in the world, many Americans in the twentieth century have developed a sense of trust in people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Because Americans strongly believe that they are "different but equal" and "[all] men are created equal" (Greene 1976, 5), they would be able to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world. The 9/11 attacks have opened Americans' eyes to a different kind of reality; a reality that enhanced their conviction that not all people enjoy the same right of being "different but equal," and that there are people who are dissatisfied with the American government's international policy. These attacks have intensified the American reactionary sense of xenophobia, cautioning people against certain cultures mainly Muslims.

Indeed, the distorted representations of Islam intensified Westerners' fear of Islam and increased the gap between western citizens and Muslims. In *The Islamophobia Industry* Nathan Lean contends that "whether classified as a social anxiety or a psychological trauma brought on by a certain set of experiences, Islamophobia is, in its most simple terms, the fear of Islam and Muslims. It is that fear that then leads to hatred, hostility, and discrimination" (2012, 13).

Islam is a religion that is often misunderstood by Westerners due to the political and regional conflicts between powerful governments which have colonial interests in countries inhabited by Muslim citizens who actually have no part in this struggle. Since the Middle Ages, the image of Muslims has been distorted and misrepresented in the Western World. Shadid and Koningsveld in "The Negative Image of Islam and Muslims in the West: Causes and Solutions," contend that the roots of this conflict extend back to the expansion of the Islamic Empire

which began in 622 and lasted until 1492, the year of the fall of Granada. In this period the Muslim World experienced an enormous expansion, with Islam spreading from the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa and some parts of Asia and Europe (Shadid and Koningsveld 2002, 177).

The image of Muslims in the twentieth century became more distorted in the mentality of westerners. Western media and politicians contributed in propagandizing a sense of hatred, racism, and perennial threat by Muslims. For decades prior to the 9/11 attacks the West has harbored unjustifiable hatred towards Muslims and Islam:

Daily events in which both the relationship between the Western and Muslim World and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and North America is a central issue when combined with various publications on this topic show that the relationship between the groups concerned is a tense one. Mutual contacts are based mainly on stereotypes and prejudice, which are clearly observable in the various reports in the media in which Muslims are described as fanatics, irrational, primitive, belligerent, and dangerous. Such generalizations and simplifications indicate that where expertise is lacking, fantasy surges ahead and where knowledge is faulty, emotion plays a central role in the regulation of the course of mutual relationships (Shadid and Koningsveld 2002, 174).

Without doubt, the gap between Americans, Arabs, and Muslims has widened drastically after the 9/11 attacks. If there was any hope for bridging the cultural, political, and ideological gaps between American citizens and Muslims, these tragic incidents forebode more misconceptions and conflicts that will affect future generations. Halaby makes it evident in *Once in a Promised Land* that hatred and fear of Muslims are intensified in the political and social consciousness of the American citizens since the beginning of the twenty-first century. She emphasizes the destructive and provocative role of media in spreading adversity and encouraging islamophobia. In the novel, Salwa apprehends to what extent these provocations are harmful to the harmony of the American-Arab relationships when she hears the

voice on the radio say:

is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us! Mahzlims? who are just waiting to attack us.... (56).

These provocations and open attacks on Arabs and Muslims contribute in awakening the Arab diaspora to respond to and reject a systemized western political and ideological campaign to stereotype them.

## 2. The impact of stereotypes on the American society

Halaby represents the modern Arab intellectual who responds back to the American society by using English as a form of expression and also by dealing with sensitive social and financial issues in a postcolonial era. Halaby's employment of the English language in the writing of her novel is of big significance. Born to a Palestinian/ Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby has the opportunity to comprehend and use both Arabic and English languages. This mastery of English serves her major concern which is to address the Western world in general and the Americans in specific. Halaby's use of English as a medium of writing enables her to convey a strong message to a wide audience through her fiction. Contrary to what Bill Ashcroft et al. assert in *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), Halaby employs her fluency in English and familiarity with the American local dialects in order to 'write back' to American imperialism. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft and et al assert that

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of post-colonial writing which follows is largely a discussion of the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture. (2002, 7)

Using standard American English does not present her as a dominated writer. In fact, her mastery of the language empowers her voice and enables her to express her ideas.

In her novel, Halaby projects three different attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims in America: the first reflects some of the American officials who hold Arabs and Muslims as responsible and accountable for the extremist actions of certain individuals on 9/11. In correlation with the first, and in response to it, the second attitude projects the American public's hostile reaction towards Arabs after the 9/11 attacks, serving the American official's agenda by means of directing the general public's anger toward an intended target. Yet another attitude reflects the demeanor of some American patriots who believe in the superiority of America by means of hostility, harm, and suffering projected on the other in the name of keeping the country safe regardless of the amount of harm and suffering that others might be exposed to.

First, I will shed light on the role of American politicians and officials who express a considerable amount of hatred towards Arabs and Muslim and blame them for the crimes committed by few extremists on 9/11. More than others, these government officials are aware of the fact that not all Muslims and Arabs are terrorists or might cause a threat to America, but they tend to make life tough on Arabs and deprive them of a normal life as an attempt to avenge the attacks on New York and the Pentagon. As Nathan Lean contends in *The Islamophobia Industry* (2012), only "few writers or scholars would be bold as to argue that public fear and anxiety of Muslims is an entirely fabricated phenomenon." (14). In fact, Halaby boldly insinuates this social injustice and premediated condemnation of Arabs in her novel by portraying the FBI's harassment of Jassim after he accidentally hits an American teenager with his car and causes his death. Halaby conveys this exaggerated fear and hatred through Jack's stereotypical attitude, a former FBI agent whose mission is to gather information about Jassim.

He harbored no ill will toward either Salwa or Jassim, just felt that not everything was in its place, was as it should be. These are some scary times we live in, he reasoned to himself. *My number one duty is to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it's our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police, to be the eyes and the ears of the community, besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done to anyone. Dammit, if*

*you're going to live in this country, you're going to have to abide to the rules here* (173).

As depicted in the novel, Marcus, Jassim's boss "[realized] the extent [his] government will go to for the sake of justifying what they see as revenge" (226). Marcus warns Jassim that the American government will not allow him to live in peace and will do whatever it takes to make him miserable and pay for what a small group of radicals did on 9/11. Marcus is aware of the fact that most Muslims are victims of this political struggle over power, but this does not prevent him from firing Jassim.

The second attitude towards Arabs depicted in Halaby's novel is represented through the American public reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Americans see Islam as a destructive power that threatens their welfare and existence. This reaction depicts the Americans' phobia gone to an extreme, and also shows how their exaggerated fear has affected their reasoning and good judgment. In the novel, when people express their concern about the safety of the city water supplies, and "if someone were to drop a vial of some potent agent ... into the supplies," Jassim, the water engineer and the target of these concerns, claims that:

It's unlikely. To threaten the safety of the water system, an enormous amount of contaminant would have to be added, and the systems in place would be able to detect it and remove the threat.... Nothing has changed.... Our water supply has always been vulnerable, and all the preparation in the world will not prevent someone who wants to do harm from dumping a large quantity of some contaminant somewhere in the water supply. However- and this is very important to note- any change in water quality, no matter how subtle, will be detected immediately, contained, and prevented from reaching consumers (25).

Halaby also depicts the Americans' sense of paranoia through the irrational demeanor of a young girl who works at Wal-Mart when she calls the security guard for Jassim just because he is an Arab. This young girl's perplexity in dealing with her fear of seeing an Arab shopping at the mall cripples her logic and drives her to over-exaggerate her extreme precautionary procedures. Jassim's wife who has become very impatient with people's irrationality towards this fear and discrimination against Arabs shouts at the young girl:

So you looked at my husband, a professional man in his forties staring at the motorcycle, and you thought that he was suspicious (30)?

Mandy, the security lady, apologetically explains to Salwa the irrational behavior of the young employee by saying:

Ma'am, I'm sorry. This all seems to be a big misunderstanding. I think people are a little freaked out by the idea that someone might try to blow up a mall here in Tucson. We actually have snipers on the roof today, if you can believe that. We were warned today to be on the alert for any odd activity. I guess odd activity is subjective... (31).

These two incidents not only reflect people's paranoia, but also intensify the public's naivety and ignorance in dealing with serious situations. Ironically, a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix, who has nothing to do with Arabs or Muslims, was killed in retaliation (21). This incident not only depicts the public's irrationality, but also reflects Americans xenophobia; an ominous phenomena that is considered new in the American society and that leads to a transformation in the American-immigrants relationships.

Apparently, Jassim shows a more mature understanding of the Americans' frame of mind than his wife. He expresses his awareness of the of these new changes in America by asserting to his wife that " [t]his is new for Americans. They don't know what to do, and they are unexposed to the rest of the world. The real world" (58.) On the other hand, Salwa who is American by birth and drawn to the American life style, has picked up many of their habits. Salwa's reaction to Americans' fear and anger reveals an irrational behavior and a lack of understanding of the severe circumstances that have caused a drastic change in people's attitudes towards "others". Like the Americans depicted in the novel, Salwa herself easily tends to stereotype others and falls into the pitfall of misconception. Although not all Americans, in fact only few, mistreat and condemn her for being an Arab, Salwa does not hesitate to call Americans "stupid and macho," forgetting that there are still people who show support and understanding of her situation. And the violent end she faces at the end of the novel is only a result of her bad choice and irresponsible affair with Jake, a younger drug addict, and not because of all American's machismo.

Salwa does not only stereotype Americans, but also projects the same attitude onto Jordanians. When she retells the story of Jack's daughter who escapes with a Jordanian from Zarqa, she immediately refers to the latter as a drug user without factual evidence or further investigation into his social and economic background. Zarqa is the second biggest city in Jordan, an industrial city known for its diverse population and high statistics of crime in the country. Whether the Jordanian boyfriend is a drug user or not, the narrator's choice of Zarqa as a hometown for a drug dealer is a form of stereotyping.

On the other hand, Jassim who seems more aware of the Americans' indulgence in their daily lives and their pursuit of their materialistic dreams, attempts to justify the public's reaction to the horrific attacks on New York. Although hurt and insulted by some Americans' unfair treatment and racism towards Arabs, Jassim with great equanimity tends to justify their fear and frustration in these circumstances. Even when he is fired from his job because some of his clients express in front of Jassim's boss their refusal to deal with an Arab who has been questioned by the FBI, he understands that his boss's decision stems from his fear of going out of business and not because of his prejudice against Arabs and Muslims.

### 3. Hybridity of Fairytales and Reality

Like many Arab writers, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* falls into Fredric Jameson's category of literature of "national allegories" (1986, 69). Her intriguing narrative is a combination of Arabic traditional folktales and a realistic embodiment of the story of an Arabic couple who once believed that their dreams would come true in the land of fortune and opportunities. Halaby manages to address one of the most sensitive issues that has great political, social, and economic impact on Arabs' lives in the twenty first century. She aptly employs an old generation story, representing it in a new form that reflects Arab individual's blind attraction to America, which results in destroying their cultural identity. Halaby chooses the image of the *Ghula*, known in Arabic culture as an ugly old lady who changes her appearance and attracts children to her cave by offering them food and treats in order to eat them while they are asleep, to represent the image of America. Like the *Ghula* in the fabula, America is depicted as an old lady that lures Jassim and Salwa with its "glossiness" (15), fortune, and great opportunities. As soon as they get used to the luxurious and glamorous life in America, the ambitious couple is severely destroyed by American materialism.

Halaby employs a unique narrative technique as she reverses the traditional norm of narration. Usually, fiction containing a story within a story projects the realistic tale as the primary text, with the folktale embedded as a secondary fabula (Bal 2004, 54). Instead, Halaby chooses to make the grandmother's folktale the primary text and the realistic narrative, that of Jassim and Salwa in America, the embedded text. The primary text does not only mirror the embedded text, it also provides a closure for the story. In the novel, the reader is not told whether Jassim and Salwa return to their country. However, after a close reading of the fairytale, which recounts the mutilation of a young girl by the *Ghula*, resulting in the transformation of a nightingale to a man that carries her "home across the land and sea, hoping that with proper care, she would recover from her wounds" (335), one tends to conclude Salwa's imminent return to Jordan.

Interestingly, Halaby chooses to tackle a very sensitive issue in her novel by following the traditional Arabic narrative style when projecting fantastical fiction, as she opens her novel with "*kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan*" (1). And then she offers a literal translation of this introductory phrase which goes as follow: "*They say there was or there wasn't in olden times a story as old as life....*" As a matter of fact, this inaccuracy in the translation of the opening sentence is of big significance. Her translation of this expression adds more confusion to the reader's comprehension of the cultural and political implications of her text as it gives the reader a reason to doubt the narrative being told, or even more; to doubt the official story surrounding the 9/11 attacks. According to Halaby's literal translation of "*kan ya ma kan....*," one would get the impression that the narrator insinuates that some of the details and events that take place in the story are susceptible to doubt. In the novel, Jassim clearly reveals his skepticism towards the American government's accusation of Muslims' responsibility of the attacks as he addresses Salwa by saying:

"[w]ho do you think wants to blow things up? This is all made up, *hocus pocus*. It's a big fat excuse to cause more problems back home"(58.)

Apparently, the closest reiteration of "kan ya ma kan .." is 'once upon a time', which supposedly retells the events of an actual narrative. However, even if fiction is intended, the narrator's, or the implied author's intention and political message cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, placing the novel within the frame of a fairy tale supports the social and political implications of the text. The novel exposes the true nature of stereotypes and paranoia which is a blend of truth and lies, illustrating that all actual events, like stories are susceptible to questioning and doubt.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is apparent in Halaby's novel that it is not the actions of Arabs and Muslims that really matter, but their appearance and origin that determine whether they are either with or against the Americans in the fight against terrorism. People do not trust Jassim and Salwa and expect them to cause great harm to Americans because of their nationality and their Arabic features. President Bush's important statement against terrorism "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror" does not guarantee the couple's safety and their acceptance by the American society.

Unfortunately, only harm and pain are brought upon the two Arab characters in the novel. Although Jassim and Salwa have their personal mistakes and flaws, they definitely do not threaten America's national security. Jassim and Salwa are law-abiding citizens and do not raise any suspicion. However, these factors do not save them from the unjustified ill-treatment and suspicion. Although Jassim and Salwa do not conform to the national and religious stereotype of Muslims, and perform their duties as any American citizens, they are still seen as potential threats to American security. The dilemma is that "they will have to come to terms with being pushed to the margins of a society that, prior to that, embraced them and their professionalism" (Bosch-Vilarrubias 2016:121)

Jassim and Salwa naively assume that adopting the American way will help them assimilate easier into the host culture, guaranteeing their acceptance as Americans. They nevertheless remain outsiders and potential terrorists who may threaten freedom and democracy in the world. Salwa believes that it is enough to be born in America and have an American citizenship in order to change a long history of misconception towards Arabs and Muslim. "Jassim [on the other hand] initially tries to ignore the repercussions of 9/11 on him as an Arab. He continues to convince himself that his white-collar job and its concomitant social privileges will protect him from surrounding hostility". (Awad 2012:254) They definitely become victims of the false belief that Fanon warns of in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* that if they speak the White man's language and behave like the white man (1967:17-8) they will be considered an equal to Americans. But putting on the American mask only intensifies Jassim's and Salwa's sense of alienation and makes it impossible for them either to live a normal life in America or to go back to their home in Jordan.

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## الصور النمطية والارتياح في أميركا ما بعد الحادي عشر من سبتمبر في رواية ليلي حليبي (كان ياما كان في أرض الميعاد)

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### ملخص

من بين التعقيدات الكثيرة التي سببتها هجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر إلى العالم مهمة تعزيز الصورة المشوهة للعرب والمسلمين في العالم الغربي، ودون شك كشفت هذه الصورة عن تعرض الشتات العربي في الغرب لأشكال جديدة، ومنتامية من التهديدات والتعقيدات. ولقد خلق الشعور الأمريكي المفرط بالارتياح في أعقاب كارثة الحادي عشر من سبتمبر خوفاً وكراهية غير مبررتين تجاه العرب والمسلمين الذين يلعبون أدواراً مهمة في المجتمع الأمريكي. وقد أدى ذلك إلى ظهور عدد من الكتاب العرب الذين تحملوا مسؤولية تمثيل صورة إيجابية للعرب من خلال التعبير عن رغبتهم في العيش في سلام ووثام مع بقية العالم. ومن الأصوات البارزة التي تدعو إلى تغيير جذري في تصوير العرب بمظهر غير الإرهابيين هي الكاتبة العربية الأمريكية، ليلي حليبي. وتناقش هذه الورقة محاولة حليبي، في روايتها (كان ياما كان في أرض الميعاد)، لتسليط الضوء على الصورة المشوهة للمسلمين والعرب في أميركا ما بعد الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، وتركز الورقة على توظيف حليبي المثير للنصوص المضمنة والقصص الشعبية من خلال خلق مزيج من الحقائق والأكاذيب التي تعكس حقيقة مفهوم الصور النمطية.

الكلمات الدالة: الشتات العربي، الصور النمطية، رهاب الإسلام، ما وراء القصص، السردية.

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