



Diaspora and Identity Crisis in *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby

Azhar Elias Khudhair

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Languages, Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India.

Prof. Nutan Kotak

School of Languages, Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India.

Abstract

The objective of this study is to provide a detailed analysis of the identity crisis experienced by Arab-American Diaspora individuals in the novel *Once in A Promise Land* by Laila Halaby. Halaby addresses the problems of racism, discrimination, and the uncertainty of identity that impact the Arab American community following the September 11th terrorist attack. The author illuminates the experiences of her prominent characters, Salwa and Jassim, in America, elucidating how this occurrence diminished their social standing and raised doubts about their presence in America. Halaby portrays the resentment felt by her characters who are enticed into a fantasy of assimilating into a homeland that surpasses their native culture, religion beliefs, and language. Halaby discusses the means of survival in America, which includes the difficulties of dealing with harassment and verbal transgressions. She exposes the inability of Salwa and Jassim to rise above America's policy of fear and forceful actions, which ultimately serve to scatter them.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Arab-American, Laila Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*.

Introduction

The concept of diaspora is widely regarded as the central characteristic of the postcolonial era. Diaspora, derived from the Greek language, refers to the migration of populations from their native territories to different regions. The term 'Diaspora' pertains to those who are geographically separated from their own land and possess a longing or aspiration to return to their homeland. (Donald 559) This work centres on the actual global migration patterns, acknowledging that these movements might occur either voluntarily or as a result of compulsion. "James Sprocter" states that the term "Diaspora" can refer to two different things. Firstly, it can describe the movement of individuals or groups across physical landscapes. Secondly, it can be used as a theoretical idea to describe a certain style of thinking or representing the world (McLeod 5). Thus, Diaspora encompasses not only the physical scattering of people across different locations, but also encompasses the complex issues of identity, belonging, and recollection that arise from being displaced. In his analysis, Robin Cohen characterises Diaspora as groups of individuals residing in a particular nation who recognise that their ancestral homeland is deeply rooted in religious, cultural, and linguistic aspects. Cohen further elucidates their allegiance and emotional connection to their country of origin. (Ibid) The truth is, the past is ever present and shapes our current circumstances. "The past is simply a result and creation of an ongoing present and its communication." (Hirsch and Valerie Smith 9). According to Stuart Hall "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 438).

Identity is not something which could be merely recovered from the past. Because no identity is a fixed one. It is something, which is constantly changing, making new versions of itself. As Hall puts it, "Cultural identity in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as being... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories, But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation." Frantz Fanon has said something similar like this, "The formation of a diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness" (229). Hall sheds light on the duality of identity (two-ness) –which refers to the coexistence of two cultures within the individuals' self and cultural hybridity. Hall claims that

cultural identities are “framed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of differences and rupture” (Hall 226).

Diaspora communities experience the challenges of exclusion, which refers to the sense of not fitting in or belonging to the host country. They perceive that their cultural traditions are being misrepresented or misunderstood. According to Edward Said (2000), whereas most individuals are primarily familiar with one culture, one environment, and one home, those who have experienced exile are aware of at least two. This dual perspective allows for an awareness of many aspects occurring simultaneously, which can be likened to the musical concept of contrapuntal. The phrase "Arab-Americans" refers to individuals of Arab descent, including both Muslims and non-Muslims, who have chosen to or been compelled to migrate from their native countries to the United States. The individuals in question emigrated from the eastern region, specifically Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, bringing along their religious beliefs and historical background. Residing in America compels individuals to embrace a fresh culture and establish a new sense of identity. Arab-Americans, as a diaspora group, are frequently not accepted or embraced by their new country. John McLeod argues that diaspora individuals typically face marginalisation and exclusion, preventing them from fully integrating into their new society. They may also experience ridicule and discrimination against their cultural traditions (McLeod 239). Arab-Americans in the United States are often marginalised and not fully embraced as "American" due to their distinct culture and religious beliefs.

Arab-Americans from the diaspora move to America in search of employment, education, and sanctuary. Regrettably, they find themselves ensnared in a condition characterised by a lack of both stability and independence. They reside in an intermediate state and experience the distress of not fitting in. "Homi Bhabha" defines the in-between space as the creation of the gaps and shifts between different domains of difference, where the collective experiences of nationhood, community interests, or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha 2). Existing in a state of liminality, caught between the past and present, the internal and external, and the Arabian and American identities, is often regarded as a challenging experience. Individuals naturally struggle to fully embrace a sense of belonging to location. The terrorist attacks on September 11th have prompted the emergence of the concept of identity among Arab-Americans. Themes of displacement and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims in America are prevalent in the majority of texts. As noted by Pauline Kaldas, these themes have become more prominent following the events of September 11 and the

subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the extralegal treatment of individuals. The war on Iraq can be seen as a significant milestone for Arab Americans, as it not only impacted the community itself but also raised the overall awareness of their presence among the wider American public. Arab Americans cannot attempt to interact with the world while maintaining anonymity.(Conrey and N. Fadda 59).

The impact of the tragedy on 'Arab-Americans' is evident. They confirm the stereotypes and live in a state of bitterness, despite their efforts to repair the image that has been harmed by extremist actions. As stated by Steven George Salaita, "it has been difficult to create a response to an event that had such a profound impact on the Arab American community" (Salaita 146). The September 11th tragedy marks a pivotal moment in the Arab community's experience in America, evoking a sense of belonging and identification. The majority of Arab writers residing in America focus on themes of identity, aiming to portray the experiences of Arab immigrants in their pursuit of a better life in the United States, while also respecting the rights and well-being of the pre-existing population. Arab-American writers who find themselves in this predicament openly express their support for Arabs. These writers oscillate between their cultural heritage and American cultures. Lisa Suhair Majaj argues that modern Arab-American writing is becoming more conscious of the importance of establishing relationships that go beyond the narrow confines of group identity (Majaj 326). "Majaj" contends that literature is a potent means of mirroring the circumstances faced by those of Arab descent residing in the United States. One notable Arab American writer is Laila Halaby (born in 1966), who currently resides in the United States. She possesses a deep understanding of the challenges faced by Arabs in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. She depicts the challenges encountered by Arab immigrants in the United States.

Discussion

Once in a Promise Land (2007) by Halaby is a novel that tells the narrative of Salwa and Jassim, a Jordanian Muslim couple who immigrated to Tucson, a city located a short distance from New York. Jassim is employed as a Hydrologist, while his wife Salwa is employed as a banker. They depart from the arid landscapes of their home country, Jordan, and migrate to the United States in order to pursue their fundamental aspirations. Following the terrorist incident on September eleventh, their lives have been altered. They are unable to evade the racial discrimination perpetrated by American citizens and FBI officers. Jassim, a Hydrologist, is suspected of being a terrorist by the FBI because to a conspiracy against him by his WASP

coworkers Corey, Bella, and Lisa. His colleagues closely monitor him, regularly inspecting his computer and diligently recording his statements. All of these factors contribute to Jassim falling into the custody of the FBI. Halaby characterises the FBI's interrogation of Jassim as targeting him based on his wealth and Middle Eastern origin, emphasising the presence of animosity, bias, and animus inside the FBI organisations. Following the events of September 11th, the FBI conducts an interrogation with Jassim, during which he provides them with information:

"I am a scientist; I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter. I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil".(Halaby 232)

Halaby elucidates the transformative impact of the terrorist incident on the lives of her primary protagonists, Jassim and Salwa. She explains that they live as a quintessential American entity, devoid of any connection to their country of origin save for their familial ties. Jassim and Salwa embrace an American lifestyle in order to achieve a state of tranquilly in their lives. This is seen in Jassim's way of life, which gradually moves away from the original structure.

"Jassim delighted in the stillness the morning offered, a time before emotions were awake , a time for contemplation. This day was no exception as he got teeth, and relieved himself, the beginning of a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow. His thoughts hovered over the internal elements of self and world rather than the external. Jassim did not believe in God, but he did believe in balance. At five o'clock with day still veiled, Jassim found balance".(Halaby 3).

Regrettably, the tranquil existence of the pair is altered following the horrific occurrence on September eleventh. They encounter persistent harassment and are subjected to unwarranted suspicion in all situations. Instances of harassment occur when couples are at the shopping centre, with Salwa engrossed in selecting garments while Jassim's attention is drawn to a motorcycle parked in front of the shopping centre. Salwa

abruptly becomes aware of a lady tailing her spouse. Salwa proceeds to question the woman over her reasons for following her husband. The woman informs her that a salesman has alerted her to the fact that one of the Arabs is observing a motorcycle, seemingly with the intention of stealing the entire retail centre and making a swift escape. Salwa informs Amber (a sales associate at the shopping centre):

"I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now? ... Do you not use our brains?

This country has more than fifty million people in it and you're worried about your tacky little store.

But now you will have a lot to talk about in school.

You can say you saw a real live Arab and had to call security on him".(Halaby 30).

Salwa and Jassim provide an alibi for a girl who harbours suspicions towards Jassim due to the tragic loss of her family in a terrorist strike on September 11th. The girl develops a profound phobia for all Arabs in America. Consequently, Salwa and Jassim experienced ongoing harassment. On a particular day, as they were shopping in a store, they were overcome with a fear of terrorism. Consequently, snipers are positioned on the rooftop, and the personnel is directed to alert authorities immediately upon detecting any dubious behaviour. In this situation:

Salwa's eyes were on her husband at first but gilded over to land behind him on the security guard puffed up and close to bursting out her uniform...."is there a problem?" Salwa asked in English over her husband's shoulder."No Ma'am" "Then why are you following my husband?" "I'm doing my job, Ma'am" "Which is exactly?" asked Salwa with opened scissors in her face. To protect the security of this establishment" "And how you are doing that by following my husband?(Halaby 29)

Initially, Jassim deludes himself into believing that his seniority mitigates the occurrence of hostile behaviours. However, he gradually realises that his assumption is completely erroneous. He becomes astonished that "for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home, where he could nestle in the safe, predictable bosom of other Arabs"(Halaby 165). He realizes that his dream of a better life in America is "like a ghost who might vanish at any time without being noticed"(Halaby 57).

Salwa experiences prejudice and discrimination at her workplace, as an American customer mistreats her while attempting to open an account at the bank. Upon learning that Salwa is a Palestinian from Jordan, the individual responds with rage and arrogance, addressing Salwa with the following question:

"What does that mean?"

What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan? Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?".(Halaby 113).

These hostile actions contribute to Salwa's perception of the unjust treatment of the American population, viewing it as severe and unfriendly. She experiences heightened anxiety and exhibits exaggerated responses to any unpleasant behavior. Salwa possesses a robust personality, in contrast to her spouse who appears feeble and incapable of protecting her from hostile actions, as he expresses: "Salwa, I am sorry it has come to this. For what happened. I feel that I am responsible"(Halaby 326).

The couple realize that the American dream, which they had been experiencing, has transformed into an illusion. They are faced with the choice of either returning to their native country or confronting the circumstance. Halaby's intention is clearly to depict the consequences of the unjust actions against Arab-Americans following the September 11th attacks, and to condemn the racial rhetoric in America. The author exposes the challenge of constructing the identities of the main characters, Jassim and Salwa. The couple endeavors to have a comfortable lifestyle, although the prevailing sense of dislocation in their respective workplaces hampers effective communication between them. Due to racial profiling and the hard reality they face, Salwa and Jassim's relationship deteriorates, causing them to drift apart. Salwa conceals multiple secrets from her spouse and becomes pregnant without his consent, but she is overwhelmed by a subsequent miscarriage. Jassim discovers solace in the presence of Penny, an American waitress, as a means to alleviate his feelings of solitude, particularly following his vehicle accident. Salwa and Jassim are culpable for breaching the familial ties, resulting in their subsequent seclusion. Upon learning of Salwa's plan to return to Jordan without him, he becomes aware that a rift between them could potentially result in the termination of their relationship:

"In leaving out what was most on his mind, Jassim realized they had

spent their lives together not saying what mattered most , dancing

around the peripheries instead of participating. We had seen in

her a passion and excitement for life that had become dulled

almost immediately upon their arrival in the United States.

What he wanted in her couldn't exist in America, couldn't

Exist with him"(Halaby 303).

Salwa and Jassim epitomize the predicament faced by Arab immigrants. They are willing to adopt the American way of life while preserving their identity and Arab history. Salwa displays the American flag on her car, a gift from her American friend, as a means of protecting herself against racial assaults. Despite holding three nationalities - Jordanian, Palestinian, and American - she experiences a sense of rootlessness, disconnected from her original homeland. Halaby thinks that Salwa's birth in America is a curse. She says "Salwa hadn't fully realized yet was that in breathing her first breath on America soil, she had been cursed"(Halaby 49). She gives a full description of this voluntary exile:

"Because while place of birth does not alter genetic materials,

It does not stitch itself under the skin and stay attached by virtue

Of invisible threads, so that if a person leaves that place for

Somewhere else (whether because she's been kicked out and

Forcibly sent away or because she is simply returning to the

Home of her parents, there is always an uncomfortable tugging

As the silken (in her case) threads are pulled taut".(Halaby 49)

Halaby reflects the intricate predicament of the protagonist, Salwa, in her story. She elucidates the efforts of Arab-Americans to construct their own distinct identity, while acknowledges their vulnerability and enduring ties to their ancestral roots. The topic of identity crisis has become particularly problematic, especially in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11th, which have exacerbated racism and discrimination among individuals. Arabs face restrictions in freely residing in America, unlike other ethnic groups. This perspective is evident in various instances, particularly the sexual relationships between Arab women and American males, which subsequently escalate into forceful assaults. These incidents serve to

support the notion that Arab ethnicity is no longer tolerated within the United States. Thus, America serves as an emblem of disappointment for Arabs who seek an improved existence.

Halaby" demonstrates Salwa's strong commitment to her cultural heritage. Salwa utilizes her proficiency in the Arabic language to elucidate her connection to her cultural identity with her Arab companion, Randa. Similarly, Salwa is drawn to her buddy, Jake, who engages in conversation with her in the Arabic language and manages to charm her. He locates Salwa:

Mature without seeming old. This mixed with her foreignness made her sophisticated, and married . The challenge of this combination turned him on, and he wandered if all Arab woman had this allure (the physical one and the shadow of a man behind them) and if that was why they veiled themselves. (Halaby 171)

Salwa is fond of Jake and finds his attention to be comforting. She surpasses the boundaries of her role and engages in a sexual relationship with him; subsequently, she is assaulted by Jake when she declined to end her marriage. Salwa refrains from using the Arabic language when informing her friend Randa about her betrayal towards her spouse. She is unable to articulate or contemplate the matter in Arabic. She is aware that treachery is considered forbidden in their society, therefore she chooses not to utter the word in her own language. Despite informing Randa about her platonic relationship with a male individual, she alternates between languages, transitioning from English to Arabic to provide additional information. For a married woman in their culture, forming a friendship with a male is considered inappropriate. In American culture, it is often deemed insignificant to demonstrate commitment to one's marriage. Jassim is bilingual, proficient in both Arabic and English. For example, when he interacts with Penny, an attractive American waitress, he reprimands himself in English, questioning his actions with phrases such as "what in God's name, on God's earth, am I doing?" (Halaby 159). However, he utilized the Arabic language to inform Penny that he was unable to proceed with the scheduled meeting, stating loudly in Arabic, "I cannot do this" (Halaby 160). Jassim attributes his treachery to the geographical separation between himself and Salwa, and rationalizes his relationship with Penny as a form of solace following his automobile accident. Halaby discloses that Arabs experience a sense of guilt while discussing anything pertaining to sexuality or their personal life concerns.

She suggests that these things are intolerable for Arabs. Halaby's primary objective is to utilize the English language as a means to acquaint Americans with Arab culture, religion, language, and beliefs.

Additionally, Halaby aims to dispel misconceptions and incorrect notions about Arabs. Her intention is to persuade the reader of the superiority of Arabs in certain situations. Furthermore, she asserts that the conflict arising from the diverse cultures and values has a profound impact on the mental state of immigrant individuals. Halaby further illustrates the strong connection of her characters to their Arabic ethnicity by highlighting that Salwa and Jassim frequently consume Arabic cuisine. Salwa makes baklava, a traditional Arabic dish. A period of nine years in America is insufficient to erase the recollections of their previous experiences.

Salwa consistently commends the Arabic coffee brewed by her intimate companion Randa, describing it as a beverage that alleviates homesickness spanning hundreds of miles (Halaby 284). Despite experiencing experiences of homelessness and relocation, food serves as a unifying force for communal life among Arab Americans. According to Edward Said, being an Arab Muslim was unfairly associated with terrorism. He argues that Islam is often blamed for things that people dislike about the world's changing political, social, and economic systems. According to Edward Said (12), the right perceives Islam as barbaric, the left sees it as a medieval theocracy, and the center views it as a form of unappealing exoticism. Regrettably, the media plays a detrimental role by exacerbating the notions of prejudice and racism towards Arab-Americans. The American media contributes to the increasing portrayal of hostility and aggression between Arabs and Americans. "Halaby" argues that the media exacerbates the lack of distinctions, particularly in the aftermath of a terrorist act. One day Salwa returns from her work in her car, she:

Stopped at a red light with her window closed against the unbearable heat, which seemed as though it would never, ever end. She pressed the forward scan button on the radio, searching for the station with soft rock and no commercials. A man's voice blared out: "is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorist? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Who are just want (Halaby 56).

Arab-Americans suffer from the negative effects of generalization, physical attacks, and racial profiling. They endeavor to establish their lives with a fresh sense of self, akin to other marginalized groups such as Turks and Iranians, but encounter repudiation in an inhospitable setting. From a psychoanalytic perspective, those who identify as 'Arab-Americans' engage in a quest for self-identity in order to get the idealized satisfaction they desire.

The journey of identity formation may create the confusion as "Stuart Hall" states:

"Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of being.

It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

For being eternally fixed in some essentials past, they are subjects to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power".(Hall 2019)

Halaby asserts that Americans perceive themselves as global citizens, but Eastern and Western civilizations continue to be isolated and distant from each other. She depicts American society as a clandestine ghula, a female supernatural being from Arabic folklore, who entices her victims to secluded locations and consumes them. This portrayal highlights the perception that America poses a danger to Arab-Americans, particularly the protagonist Salwa, by separating her from her familiar world, traditions, and ultimately causing her downfall.

Conclusion

Halaby explores the theme of identity crisis through an in-depth analysis of her main characters, Jassim and Salwa, in her novel *Once in a Promise Land*. She depicts the psychological wounds inflicted on her characters as a result of American antagonism. She presents many instances in which Jassim and Salwa encounter challenges in public spaces to illustrate the displacement and discrimination experienced by Arabs in American society, particularly following the horrific events of September eleventh. She emphasizes the sensation of ambiguity experienced by Salwa and Jassim, which renders the portrayal of their identities within American culture quite arbitrary. Halaby portrays a bleak outcome for Jassim and Salwa, who are searching for solutions to their existential crisis. The author emphasizes that the aspiration to coexist necessitates both patience and the willingness to confront the difficulties of adapting to a new community with a distinct culture, while also facing potential dangers. She This text discusses the assertive approach used by the United States following the September 11th terrorist attack, which deeply affected the mindset of its main figures and exposed their inability to overcome their inherent limitations.

References

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Convey, C. & Fadda, N. (2007) *Writing Arab-American Identity post 9/11*, ed. Dima Dabbou. Beirut: Lebanese American University.

Donald M. Noini (2005). *Encyclopedia of Diaspora*, Ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R., and Ian

Edward, D. Said. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how we see the rest of the world*. London: Vintage Books.

Edward, D. Said. (2000). *Reflections on Exile and other essays*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University press.

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, 1986.

Halaby, L. (2007). *Once in a Promise Land*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Hall, S. (2019). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. (URL:http://www.unipa.it/~michele.cometa/hall_cultural_identity.pdf).

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, by Bill Ashcroft, Routledge, 2011, pp. 435-438.

Harisch, M. & Smith, V. (2002). *Feminism and Cultural Memory: an Introduction*. Vol.28.No1. (URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/340890>).

McLeod, J. (2008). "Diaspora and Utopia", *Diaspora Literature and Theory-Where Now?* Ed. Mark Shackleton. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Salaita, S. George. (2005). *Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*. *College Literature*. Vol.22:2.

Skoggard. USA: Springer.

Suhair, L. Majaj. (1999) *Arabs-Americans Ethnicity: Location, coalitions, and cultural Negotiations*. "Arabs in America: Building a new future. Ed. Michael W. Suleiman. Philadelphia: Temple Up.