



LAILA HALABY AND HER WRITING: A CRITIQUE OF DIASPORA

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Abstract

Laila Halaby is a well-known Arab-American woman writer. In her interviews, Halaby says that she is Arab and American. She always feels caught between two different cultures. This experience of living between two cultures allowed Halaby to transfer all her awareness of this state into her novels. She lived in the two nations and travelled between the East and the West. Halaby is the author of many literary works. She is one of the privileged contemporary Arab-American women fiction authors. According to many critics, fiction writers and many other thinkers, Halaby's work of fiction is assessed to be among the top modern Arab- American fictional achievements. Halaby creates a good use of poetic prose in the narratives and representations of the characters. She is the author who writes a good poetry and composes fictitious tales for children. Her famous poem entitled *My Name on his Tongue* is the most recent publication. It is a memoir in poems. She has written two famous novels so far: *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land*. Both the novels received a great acclaim critically and have earned a steady readership. They study a range of critical issues, such as Arab-American identity, civil liberties, racism and the effects of September 11 attacks.

Keywords

Diaspora, identity, separation, equality, liberty, violence, etc.

Full Article

Laila Halaby, a well-known Arab-American woman novelist, reveals the American vision of Islam and Muslims through her novel *Once in a Promised Land*. The picture is drawn with fear, horror and above all with sympathy. *Once in a Promised Land* is a post September 11 novel whose popularity is due to discussing the reality that Arabs and Middle Easterners played a very important role in the globe's transformation. The novel gives an idea about the lifestyles of Arab Americans who belong to an Arab origin. Jassim and Salwa, a Jordanian couple, used to live in America post September 11 attacks. They endured certain changes and misfortunes just for being Arabs and Muslims. The current chapter gives a general description of September 11 attacks. It shows the effect of this calamity, the discrimination, intolerance and the other cultural boundaries that made Arab and Muslim women's assimilation into the American society more doubtful.

West of the Jordan is the first famous published novel by Halaby. It was published in 2003 and it won a PEN/Beyond Margins Award. In this novel, Halaby aimed at representing identity crisis of Arab communities in diaspora. As a writer, Halaby illustrated the conflict throughout the hybrid subjects who experienced and tasted such pain, loss and resistance. Halaby paid much attention to Arab women's issues by showing the female characters who stand against males' oppression and call for women's liberty. The author wrote about the Arab-American experiences in the American community. Through, *West of the Jordan*, Laila Halaby portrayed the lifestyles of four Arab cousins who grew up under various conditions. Halaby's characters found it difficult to bear the American discrimination against them. They were prejudiced because of their dual cultural heritage. Halaby suggested that accepting a new life in America did not necessarily bring happiness, justice and liberation in all situations. Thus, Halaby made a clear



vision about the treatment of Americans towards Arabs and Muslims around the world in general and in the USA in particular. Halaby coped with the problems of discrimination, marginalisation and identity crisis that influenced the Arab-American Community after the terrorist attacks of September 11. She shed light on the experiences of her characters by clarifying how September 11 attacks weakened their social position and turned their presence in America to be more questionable.

Once in a Promised Land is a significant novel in the genre of Arab-American literature, which was published by Halaby in 2007. It is one of the most interesting Arab-American novels published post September 11 in America. It is a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection. In addition, it was named by the Washington Post as one of the top 100 works of fiction for 2007. Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* centres on the predicaments that Arab Americans faced after the September 11 attacks in America. It tells the story of the Arab couple who stayed in America and underwent certain changes after the attacks of September 11 because of being Muslims and Arabs.

Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* depicts the attack of September 11 which is considered to be one of the biggest disasters in the memory of the American history. The September 11 events demonstrated that America was not protected from the external attacks and threats, the result after that, life changed into the worst. For instance, not only the American Muslims who suffered from the American subjugation but also the American Christians and Jews and many people from other religions. The cruelty of the September 11 attacks left its negative consequences particularly on Arab and Muslim communities' life in America despite the reality that they had nothing to do with the attacks. Explicitly, Halaby showed the Western look upon the Arab world. She represented the so-called democratic country, America in which conspiracies and wickedness are practised against Arabs and Muslims for religious and ethnic biases. After the September 11 attacks, the American characters in Halaby's story became more and more intolerant and suspicious of Arabs and Muslims. Halaby portrayed America post September 11 as a country where hatred against Arabs and Muslims is created and anti-Arab discrimination is highly remarkable and widespread.

Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* deals with the major issues the Arabs and Muslims face, such as discrimination, violence, stereotypes and prejudice. Halaby tackled many issues, such as racism, marginalisation and instability of identity crisis in her novel entitled *Once in A promise Land*. Such issues have largely created bad consequences on Arab-American immigrants' lives in the USA post September 11. Halaby highlighted the problems and involvements of the main characters in story, including Salwa and Jassim.

Throughout the novel, *Once in a Promised Land*, an Arab- American couple was faced by certain cultural changes and difficulties. Dishonesty, adultery and death are the most horrible subjects in the story. Halaby confirms that the September 11 events have weakened Salwa and Jassim's social, economic and political situation and changed their existence in America into a more doubtful one. Most significantly, Halaby focused mainly on Arab-American women's identity crisis in the analysis of *Once in a Promised Land*. Through the analysis of the novel, the author explained the issue of Salwa's hybrid identity, i.e., Salwa was affiliated neither to the American community nor to the Arab one, but she was in between. As an Arab-American woman, Salwa faced many problems with her husband Jassim in the US, immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11. Furthermore, the writer shed light on the consequences of September 11 events on the female protagonist's behaviour. This novel is an attempt to demonstrate the September 11 attacks that spoiled Salwa's marriage, her new attitudes towards her husband, her Arab-American friends and her American colleagues. Consequently, Halaby



showed how Salwa neglected her Arab roots to cope with the promised American dream and to become a sincere American idealist national.

Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* makes a good description of Muslim Arab-American women. Halaby also focuses on Arab-American women's identity crisis and the feelings of loss and displacement. Identity crisis is one of the most important issues in the life of Arab-American Muslim women. Halaby illustrates remarkably and successfully the sufferings of Arab-American women in the American societies because of identity crisis. The present chapter centres on identity crisis as one of the most complicated issues that face Arab-American women. Identity means a lot for everyone either for an individual or for the group. It reflects many things about one's religion, language, culture, tradition, gender, caste, ethnicity, etc. Many aspects can enlarge the oppression of Arab-American Muslim women in the USA, such as religion, culture, gender, colour, caste and national prejudice.

Halaby's *West of the Jordan* is a very important story which describes the lives of Arab-American women. It gives a reference to their lives in two worlds, the Arab world and the American one. It explains identity crisis and diaspora in the lives of Arab-American women. Halaby's *West of the Jordan* concentrates on portraying the various experiences of the four displaced Arab and Arab-American women Soraya, Khadija, Hala and Mawal who are the four main female characters in the story. It explores whether one can ever choose to become Arab or American if he/she has an integrated identity. It emphasises on how Arab-American female characters, whether living in Palestine or in America, assert that their individual identities are questionable outside their location. It is the analysis of diaspora in its gendered, cultural, racial and political context. The Arab diaspora is not just made of Palestinians, yet it involves all Arabs existing permanently in countries other than their countries of origin.

The title of the novel, *West of the Jordan* implies geographical and political orientation of Jordan. Geographically, it splits Jordan from the Palestinian districts, which are situated in its West part. In addition, in the title of the novel, there is no clear and direct reference to the nation itself but to the Jordan River, which has a well-known historical symbolic significance in both fables and religion. For instance, in the Bible crossing it meant achieving the Promise Land, i.e., Palestine. Mawal narrates about the West of the Jordan River, i.e., Palestine as the place of her origin where her mother was originated from that point. The title of the story may also point to the USA where the other protagonists of the novel, namely Hala, Soraya and Khadija are living at present respectively. In this way, the title likewise refers to the three cousins' journey from the East towards the West. The USA may represent the Promised Land because it is a place of new beginnings and possibilities for immigrants. Soraya, Hala and Khadija narrate their experiences in America whereas Mawal talks about Palestine. Yet, every narrator negotiates between the two societies of the Middle East and America.

West of the Jordan draws the reader's attention to the critical issues of race, social class, gender, age, identity and diaspora. Diasporic developments in *West of the Jordan* are a mixture of loss and gain, happiness and sorrow. The characters have lost part of their associations with their homelands and their bonds with some of their traditions may have been faded away at times. However, in addition to having the probability of recreating their relations with the traditions of their individual cultures, they also gained new connections with their host cultures.

Both the novels of Halaby examine the social and cultural situation of Arabs in the USA as well as in the Middle East with a special reference to the Palestinian Case. Halaby mainly makes an identification and investigation between the American promises and the challenging facts that quietly exist along with them. Halaby gives a reference to the American bias against Arabs and Muslims. She also sheds light on the American support for Israel. Palestinians are displaced from their lands. They are in search of a safe shelter to protect themselves somewhere



out Palestine as refugees. Because of both the American discrimination and the Arab rulers' dictatorship, Arab-American women are torn out between two diverse cultures and two diverse nations. They are struggling for protecting their rights and identities.

In short, Laila Halaby is one of the most popular Arab-American women Writers. She published many prominent literary achievements. In her fictitious writings, Laila Halaby centers on the themes of identity crisis, diaspora, September 11 attacks, exile, etc. in relation to Arab immigrants. As a writer, Halaby tried to get an ultimate success over the variations between nations, races and cultures. She highlighted the status of Arabs and Muslims who became the direct targets of the Americans' hostility and suspicion. Arab Americans are deprived of their legal rights in a country that is claimed to be the best defender nation of democracy, peace, justice, freedom and opportunities. The description of identity crisis of diasporic Arab immigrants is obviously mentioned in Halaby's literary writings. Absolutely, the shocking attacks of September 11 and the following wars on terror resulted in personal predicaments to Arab Americans. Even though they are American citizens, they still have the features and roots that classify them as the others or the enemy.

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