



Suspicion and Intolerance Towards Arab Immigrants in the Aftermath of September 11th with a particular Reference to Laila Halaby's *Once In a Promised Land: A Critical Analysis*

RAED NAFEA FARHAN

Al-Dulab Secondary School for Boys, Hit Education Department, General Directorate of Education in Anbar, Iraq

raedd5095@gmail.com

[Phone no: 07805278640](tel:07805278640)

Abstract:

September 11th, 2001, was a turning point in the United States of America and worldwide. Arab immigrants have become a target of suspicion, mistrust, and intolerance (Salari, 2002). The negative attitudes have been intensively directed towards Arab immigrants more than any other racial or ethnic groups. This paper tries to show how the events of September 11th have greatly urged the sense of mistrust and misunderstanding to the extent of discriminating against the name Arabs. Events of September have inspired all the talented writers trying to help Americans understand themselves. Hence, this research paper explains how pushing forward this creative work, *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby, is very useful in letting the American reader realize his exaggerated, racist attitudes towards the Arab immigrants and, at the same time, it is a call for getting rid of racism and discrimination and giving a broader chance for coexistence and mutual understanding. This paper also explains the relationship between suspicion and intolerance to the modern migration policy in the United States of America.

Key words: Arab-Americans, Arab immigrants, suspicion, intolerance, psychological distress,

الشك والتعصب تجاه المهاجرين العرب في أعقاب 11 سبتمبر مع إشارة خاصة إلى رواية ليلي الحلبي
ذات مرة في أرض الميعاد: تحليل نقدي

رائد نافع فرحان

ثانوية الدولاب للبنين- قسم تربية هيت- المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة الانبار- العراق

الخلاصة:

كان 11 سبتمبر 2001 بمثابة نقطة تحول في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وفي جميع أنحاء العالم. لقد أصبح المهاجرون العرب هدفاً للشك وعدم الثقة والتعصب (سالاري، 2002). وقد تم توجيه المواقف السلبية بشكل مكثف تجاه المهاجرين العرب أكثر من أي مجموعة عرقية أو إثنية أخرى. تحاول هذه الورقة أن تبين كيف أن أحداث 11 سبتمبر قد حثت بشكل كبير على الشعور بعدم الثقة وسوء الفهم إلى حد التمييز ضد اسم العرب. لقد ألهمت أحداث سبتمبر جميع الكتاب الموهوبين الذين يحاولون مساعدة الأمريكيين على فهم أنفسهم. ومن هنا، تشرح هذه الورقة البحثية كيف أن المضي قدماً بهذا العمل الإبداعي، "مرة واحدة في أرض الميعاد" للكاتبة ليلي حلبي، مفيد جداً في جعل القارئ الأمريكي يدرك مواقفه العنصرية المبالغ فيها



تجاه المهاجرين العرب، وفي الوقت نفسه، هو بمثابة رواية. الدعوة إلى التخلص من العنصرية والتمييز وإتاحة فرصة أوسع للتعايش والتفاهم المتبادل. كما تشرح هذه الورقة العلاقة بين الشك والتعصب في سياسة الهجرة الحديثة في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرب الأميركيون، المهاجرون العرب، الشك، التعصب، الضائقة النفسية

Introduction:

The term "Arab Nation" typically denotes the geographical regions inhabited by those who speak Arabic and have ancestral ties to the nomadic tribes of Arabia, as well as those who embrace Arab principles of exceptional human qualities and aesthetics (Huafeng, Zhihao & Xuezhen, 2019). Arab-Americans are one of the ethnic groups that have been living in America for a more extended period. Arab-Americans is a term that refers to the immigrants from Arab countries who dwell permanently in the USA as well as their children and the coming generations (Suleiman, 1994). They become bilingual-bicultural, where most of them master English and the mother tongue, Arabic.

Historically, Arab immigrants went to the USA through three waves:

- 1- The first wave started in 1875. The predominant demographic consisted of individuals who identified as Christians hailing from Syria and Lebanon.
- 2- The second wave started due to the political and economic unrest, especially after establishing Israel as a new country in 1948.
- 3- The third wave started in the 1960s, especially after opening immigration to Europe.

However, after 9/11, the situation completely changed, and the Muslims-particularly Arab-Americans, had become visible to all Americans and the world. Unfortunately, this hyper-visibility is negative because light has been shed upon the Arab-Americans, and the Americans have become very suspicious of Arab-Americans and Arab immigrants in general (Ali, 2018). They are falsely accused of being terrorists and aggressive even if they carry American nationality after being subjected to naturalization (Saitof, 2020). Due to racial discrimination and suspicions against Arab-Americans, they have faced an identity crisis, and many Arabs have become afraid to disclose their ethnicity for their safety (Hussein, 2020). Intolerant practices in American society are emitted daily against Muslims and Arab Americans, and some are exposed to physical abuse (Elver, 2012).

After September 11th, hate crimes conspicuously increased against the Arab-Americans, including their harmful treatment in airports, immigration services, workplaces, streets, and other familiar places. These practices have been produced



from the suspicion that Arab Americans are likely to do unexpected, bad things at any time and should be observed anywhere (Kayyali, 2006). More obsessions with observance and suspicions are likely to indicate the hatred of culture and cultural intolerance in a society that always presents itself as civilized and the protector of human rights. Irresponsible attitudes and behaviors against the Arabs and Arab-Americans in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, that are filled with suspicion and intolerance, drew the attention of many American researchers to the study of race and whether it is positive or harmful to the American society that includes communities of many racial and ethnic backgrounds (Majaj, 2000). As mentioned earlier, several studies have discussed many topics, such as the American dream, race, and Diaspora. However, few studies have discussed suspicion and intolerance so this study will examine Suspicion and Intolerance Towards Arab Immigrants in the Aftermath of September 11th. The research question guiding this study was: Are there any feelings of suspicion and intolerance against the Arabs and Arab-Americans in American society after 9/11?

Critical Analysis:

The government officially adopted the policy of suspicion and caution against the Arab-Americans and Muslims after September 11th. In 2001, an act passed by Congress and renewed in 2003, 2007, and 2011 that enabled anti-Arab and Muslim racism: "Monitoring Arabs and Muslim groups; granting the US Attorney General to detain non-citizens whom he suspects indefinitely might have ties to terrorism, searching and wiretapping secretly, without probable cause; arresting and holding the person as material witness (Alsultany, 2012). This is regarded as justifiable racism against the Arabs and Muslims, who have been collectively demonized because intolerance and suspicion targeted all Arab Americans, whether Muslims or Christians (Joseph, 2008). Procedures taken by the American government have coincided with suspicion and discrimination against the Arab-Americans who have experienced great shock, depression, and sadness. It is very typical to feel fearful because the attitudes and behaviors of American society have entirely changed (Alsultany, 2012).

In her novel "Once in a Promised Land," Laila Halaby vividly portrays the hardships endured by Arab-Americans facing suspicion and mistrust after the pessimistic events of September 11th, 2001. The government sponsors this suspicion as in this quotation:

Salwa's eyes were on her husband at first but glided over to land behind him on the security guard, puffed up and close to bursting out of her uniform" (29).



In this conversation, Salwa speaks to a security guard following her husband, Jassim. One girl has asked this guard to come because Jassim was standing here and staring too long. He was standing and looking at the motorcycle. American people have become very intolerant of the Arabs and Arab-Americans. *Once in a Promised Land* tells the story of a couple from Jordan who immigrate to the USA to achieve their dreams of a better life and economic progress. The title suggests America as the “promised land” which people from different countries are dreaming of having the opportunity to travel to and achieve unlimited dreams (Hwang, 2019) . The husband, Jassim, works as a hydrologist who works to help providing clean water to all people. However, they have been stuck with the issue of cultural displacement especially after the events of September, 11. Questions and suspicions have been aroused regarding their ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Due to the changes happened post September, 11, Jassim accidentally hits a skateboarder and Salwa has fallen in love with an American coworker.

Halaby criticizes the idea of the “promised land” because of the Arab immigrants’ sufferings inside the United States, especially after September. It has changed from a promised land to a land of discrimination, paranoia, suspicion, conspiracy, and cultural displacement. What Jassim did not know and what Salwa had not fully realized was that she had been cursed to breathe her first breath on American soil” (Mashree, 2017). Before coming to America, Arab immigrants drew a lovely and unparalleled image in their minds about this promised land where rights are saved and humanity is saved, but once they arrived, this image changed completely to encounter a sour and unexpected reality: “*Only the America that pulled at her was not the America of her birth* (Halaby, 49),

Events of September 11th were very striking to all Americans. Hence, their mistrust and inquiries increased towards the Arab-Americans, and this side can be noticed in the behavior of Marcus, who is the boss of Jassim and begins to ask Salwa more questions about her husband, mainly after he was investigated by the FBI (The Federal Bureau of Investigation): “*Something had been different in Jassim lately*. (Halaby, 237). FBI investigations refer to the trivial accusations against the Arab-Americans to pass their lies because they are officially given a green sign to make suspicions under the pretext of saving security (Henderson, 2006). Arab Americans and Arab immigrants are discriminated against once they are recognized for their appearance as Arabs. Penny speaks about Jassim and reveals this to her friend by saying: “*Jassim is a good guy..* (Halaby, 281). From these words, we come to clear the image that has been stuck in the minds of Americans regarding Arabs as bad people, killers, and criminals.

It has become astounding that 9/11 events have brought great misunderstanding to Americans against the Arab-Americans and inspired feelings of hatred among the



middle-class people and simple workers, so we notice Jassim wondering vaguely by the city workers and city girls who have wrongly adopted what he calls “*American racism*” (Halaby, 234). Jassim is still wondering how this happens to the Arab Americans, though they have entirely adopted the American life. Emotionally, on the part of Jassim and Salwa, especially after the emotional relationship between them, suspicions are aroused against those with whom they come to build an emotional relationship in American society. They are still afraid of the American suspicion and discrimination that could appear at any time and destroy their dreams of having a stable, emotional life with American guys (Fateh & Mortada, 2017)

Suspicious looks:

Arab immigrants in America are experiencing an ethnic bias that allows cultural collision within American society to flourish. In addition to the verbal suspicions against Arab Americans, there are suspicious looks directed against Arab Americans and Arab immigrants, especially in public places. The hostile looks are always associated with insinuations of being guilty, making them afraid and excluded from the society they have lived in for an extended period peacefully to find themselves moments discriminated against and disgusted. “*So you looked at my husband.*” (Halaby, 30-31). Such looks might be changed initially from curious and confused glances to hostile, intolerant stares. For example, Arab veiled women who wear hijab prefer to stay at home and avoid public places as much as possible to avoid suspicious looks. Most Arab and Muslim women prefer to look down whenever they are encountered with suspicious stares. They prefer silence and avoid any direct clashes as they know this phenomenon has become very common in their daily activities since the 9/11 attacks. Arab Americans have realized that suspicion, discrimination, and intolerance against them will take time to vanish, and they should be patient and endure daily harassment.

Acculturation process, suspicion, and intolerance

Acculturation is the process where the groups give up some of their elements of culture and identity and replace them with other elements of culture (Chirkov, 2009). This process also includes the addition of new elements to the culture but without losing the old ones of the origin culture. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Jassim and Salwa effortlessly strived to assimilate completely into American society by adopting the American lifestyle and looking more like the American people. They live in a beautiful house located on one hill, purchase a luxurious Mercedes car, and start forming relationships with the American people. They pursue the American dream by using their way to achieve success and economic progress, so we see Salwa working in a bank and Jassim working as a hydrologist



who is very admirable by many people for his deep knowledge regarding how to tackle the problem of water shortage that Arizona and other areas are suffering. However, the organized campaigns of suspicion and intolerance against Arab Americans and Muslims have greatly handicapped their desire to integrate into American society. After September 11th, Jassim and Salwa are stuck by the discrimination shown by the American people who become suspicious of any person of Arab origin and then harassed in public places and streets (Majaj, 2000). They get emotionally separated, and each one starts looking for a partner in the hope of getting rid of their alien feelings caused by the host culture. The acculturative process cannot be successful without mutual understanding and confidence between the host culture and the people of different ethnic groups. Salwa forms an illegal relationship with Hassan and Jake that has ended, though Salwa was expecting such failure and was hesitant in her relationship with them. It has been noticed that suspicion and intolerance have been furthering isolation in the present-day Arab immigrants, particularly after the 9/11 events, who feel unsafe to indulge in the whole assimilation process, which needs a sociocultural adaptation which is the ability to cope with the daily events in the new host culture. This also demands developing relationships with friends and establishing social networks that help individuals to be more productive.

Suspicion, Intolerance, and Modern American Policy

The modern American policy regarding migrants, especially after the 9/11 attacks, has been radically changed to include its internal and external policies, such as waging war on terror, legalizing new rules that help fight terrorists, and policy of migrants restriction. The latest decisions by the American government that have been attested by the president, Trump, have been issued to restrict Arab migration to the USA under the pretext of saving the people of America (Hines, 2006). Such decisions are greatly based on suspicion and intolerance against the Arab immigrants that Laila Halaby has addressed in her touching novel, *Once in a Promised Land*. Suspicion and intolerance have become officially sponsored, though the terrorists who attacked the two towers were a few radical individuals who have nothing to do with the values of humanity. It is their land, and this is true! However, it is not reasonable to suspect all Arabs to become criminals from the point of view of the American eye, especially when most Arab immigrants hold American nationality and should enjoy all the duties and rights of American citizens. Halaby has been able to depict the view of the American policy and the sufferings of the Arab immigrants, most of whom are Arab-Americans. American people have become very intolerant to Arab Americans and immigrants, as depicted in this quotation: “*When 9/11 happened, Evan was freaked out, totally freaked out. It was weird; because once he was a teenager, did not lose it very often*”. (Halaby, 181).



It is the view of the American radicals who tirelessly call for expelling Arab immigrants from America as their existence “among us” is a threat to American national security, so all the procedures against the Arabs and Muslims, in general, are to put an end to the migration flow to America. It is revenge, sponsored by the government, against those innocent people, Arab Americans or Arab Muslims. Suspicion has become a tool for discrimination and marginalization, used wrongly to achieve selfish desires (Jamal & Naber, 2008). The events of September 11th are considered a historical moment that is the beginning of a new long history. Otherwise, this history will be very gloomy for all the humanity in this universe. The clash of civilizations results from mistrust, suspicion, intolerance, discrimination, and injustice that all cultures should deny (Majaj, 2000). For peaceful coexistence, common values accepted by all people with different religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds should be established.

Conclusion

Once in a Promised Land has drawn the image of the sufferings of Arab immigrants and Arab Americans after September 11th, 2001. Because the terrorists were of Arab origin, all kinds of discrimination, oppression, suspicion, and intolerance have been practiced against the immigrants of Arab origin, irrespective of their innocence. Their sufferings are continuous till nowadays because they have become suspicious as criminals, killers, and terrorists without evidence. They are targeted as enemies of the American people, so they warn each other to be careful against all the Arabs, even if they hold American nationality.

Suspecting all the people of Arab origin indicates that the Americans are confused about how to fight terrorism, and they only try all the possible strategies and legislations even if they are illegal. They will likely take longer to be changed because the horror of the attacks shocked the American people as they did not imagine such terrorist attacks to be executed with great accuracy, which is very challenging to American security. Laila Halaby is the narrator of all the events and works as an eye-witness to all the sufferings of the Arab immigrants, making the narration more sincere and credible. The reader can easily imagine all the narrated events that have been told skilfully. Arab Americans and Arab immigrants, in general, are undergoing sociocultural alien feelings. They have left their home culture to settle in the host culture, America, but to their disappointment, they become alien to both.

Their worries come from the false and trivial accusations that might be fired against them without providing the proper evidence. Their relationships with the American people are associated with misperception—all Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian, are rumored in American society to be terrorists. Arab immigrants are subjected to psychological distress that has reduced their life into continuous pain.



Suspicion and intolerance are not the right solutions for fighting terrorism, but more suspicions only mean igniting the sparks of hatred and malice. Halaby has skilfully tried to tackle this problem and give caution to the American people to avoid false and irresponsible suspicions that lack evidence. Terrorism cannot be defeated by suspicions or discrimination.

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