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Going to Extremes: Post-9/11 Discrimination in Fiction

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to discuss the representation of discrimination and polarization of the American society after the events of 9/11 in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). The novel presents the point of view of "the Other" and focuses on the analysis of the antagonistic processes in the American society and their outcomes in the lives of ordinary citizens, accused of being "the Other." The article examines the deterioration of beliefs and values and the "death" of the American Dream. Based on the fundamental theory of Trauma Studies, the article discusses the issues of personal and collective trauma and their representation in Laila Halaby's novel. Collective traumas may unify or polarize the society—both aspects have had negative outcomes in the USA. Increased patriotism and solidarity were particularly prominent during the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and resulted in the discrimination and polarization of the society, the anger being directed at Muslim communities. The first days of the aftermath marked the start of antagonism on different levels: despite being US citizens, representatives of the Muslim communities experienced harsh reactions in their neighborhoods, jobs, social spheres, etc. For many of those "on the other side" these processes meant the end of their normal lives and dreams. The article examines both the informational and empathic approach used by the author of the novel to disclose irreparable processes that may happen in any society.

Keywords: contemporary American fiction, September 11, discrimination, American society

September 11, 2001 started a new period in literature and history: even current events have a tendency to be viewed through the prism of 9/11. The article discusses the consequences of the tragic events of 9/11 for the Arab community in the United States of America, as described in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Immediately after the event, the world was torn by "cultural and ethnic animosities" (Conway 114). On that day, the world entered the era of moral and/or physical executions: designs for punishing the evil forces have been continuously elaborated, elements of binary opposition and segregation appeared in many societies, and instead of demonstrating any attempts to understand, discuss or explain, the extremism of Islamic fundamentalists was echoed in the form of the so-called "western extremism"—that is, demonization of Islam and Muslim traditions. As A. G. Noorani observes, "the Spectre of Islam continues to haunt very many in the media, in academia, in the arts and in scholarship, [and] few care to free themselves from its thrall" (23). Consequently, many contemporary authors have chosen this issue as a challenge: some tended to politicize their novels, while others expressed their wish to personalize the tragic event by placing the tragedy of the country within the boundaries of a single social unit, the family, and the microcosm of each person.

Laila Halaby was born in Beirut, Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother.[1] She grew up in Arizona but due to her family's extensive traveling, she had to spend time on the East and West Coasts, in the Midwest, Jordan, and Italy.

1 My America: Laila Halaby | The American Writers Museum (Accessed 23 July 2020).

Laila Halaby has written two novels, *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), and a collection of poems *My Name on His Tongue* (2012). She received the PEN/Beyond Margins Award for *West of the Jordan* (2003), and *Once in a Promised Land* appeared in the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection. In addition to fiction and poetry, Laila Halaby also writes stories for children.[2]

Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* tells a story of Salwa and Jassim, a Jordanian immigrant couple in Tucson, Arizona. The traumatic experience of 9/11 does not leave Salwa and Jassim unaffected, and the couple directly experience the negative aspects of the changing attitudes towards Arabs in the United States of America. Moreover, both protagonists are affected by separate personal traumatic events, when Salwa loses her baby due to miscarriage and Jassim kills a boy in a car accident. These incidents result not only in the deteriorating relationship between the two, but also irrevocably change the protagonists' lives.

This article will begin with a discussion of significant processes in the American society during the aftermath period and an examination of the society's polarization. Attitudes to Muslims, instigated reactions against them and binary thinking are central issues in this discussion. Further, features of 9/11 literature will be briefly surveyed to ground the analysis of the aftermath period as described in Laila Halaby's novel.

The Ever-Lasting Trauma of the Country

The trauma that the United States of America experienced on September 11, 2001 made a strong impact on the world community. Christopher Bigsby states that "America's primary response was bewilderment" (5). The tragic events of this day and a difficult aftermath period have altered almost all the spheres of life, making everyone divide their lives into before and after. The United States of America and the world entered the era of binary opposition: Us versus the Other. People wanted to find an immediate coherent explanation of the catastrophe, which, according to Jeremy Green, in literature resulted in the form of "tragic realism" (94). After the 9/11 attacks the US government and the President's administration established different agencies and organizations, the main purpose of which was to fight against terrorism. According to Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, the immediate aftermath period inspired the renewed mythological system and patriotism (32). However, often the ambiguity of political actions frightened the society, resulting in psychological instability and social disintegration. Political situation is directly related to social stability in the country. Frank Furedi states that people "continue to live in a culture concerned with a multitude of fears. Anxiety about terror competes with fear of crime, incivility, global warming and various other routine, ambient worries" (1). Before the September 11 attacks, Islam was an accepted religion as many others in the United States; however, during the aftermath period, Muslims were often treated as enemies, murderers and terrorists. This situation resulted in the seclusion of ethnic communities in many countries, especially Muslim communities. The American society was confused and bewildered—an obvious consequence of the lack of information. Despite the fact that the mass media contributed to the representation of the tragic events, the society

2 Laila Halaby — Winner of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award (Accessed 23 July 2020).

could not comprehend the scope and consequences of the catastrophe. The trauma of the country has become the trauma of the whole world, becoming the ever-lasting stigmatic phenomenon.

Immediately after the event the country stepped onto the devastating road of estrangement. As Akbar S. Ahmed states, many religious figures around President George W. Bush emphasized "the Christian nature of the USA… attacking Islam" and calling it "a very wicked and evil religion" (141-142). According to Ahmed, such hysterical attacks reinforced "already existing stereotypes of Muslims" because "to many Americans the religion of Islam simply meant terrorism or extremism" (142). Gradually, "Islam and Muslims became a matter of public discourse in America" (Elaasar 1). Thus, the world entered the dangerous period of Islamophobia and binary thinking. A term "Islamophobia" had existed in different societies for several decades; however, after the 9/11 attacks it resulted in various forms of stereotypes and prejudices. A. G. Noorani defines Islamophobia as a "dread or hatred of Islam and of Muslims, [which] is an ingredient of all sections of the media, and is prevalent in all sections of society" (41). Noorani describes it as "a malaise" of the contemporary times, pointing to dangers of fundamentalism, which "banishes reason from religion and compassion from faith" (65). As the country started quickly rolling down the road of "Islamophobia," "the sense of frustration that Muslims felt in seeing themselves portrayed negatively" increased (Ahmed 142-144). Such confrontation of the society members resulted in what Frank Furedi calls "a culture concerned with a multitude of fears" (1). Ahmed points out the fact that "this problem has become even more acute after September 11," continuing "to cause misunderstandings on both sides"; he raises a question of building mutual understanding between the West and Islam, explaining the necessity of "the intellectual discourse [which had been earlier] framed in the context of the 'war on terrorism'" (144). This is, probably, the main reason why some authors have chosen to explain the causes and outcomes of terrorism to the readers, helping them to recover from the tragedy, and, at the same time, aiding the audience in crossing the bridge between the two opposed camps. Such 9/11 narratives, in which Muslim portraiture is central, question the notion of the polarity between "Us" and "Them" as a construct by denouncing clichés and cultural taboos, which becomes a significant endeavor in consolidating the identity of the American society, including the Muslim-Americans' traumatic post-9/11 experiences. Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* explores the personal trauma and examines traumatic experience caused by discrimination and social marginality. In this way, the author represents the stand of many Muslim-Americans and their personal and collective trauma of discrimination during the aftermath period and later.

Main Features of Post-9/11 Literature

In literature the post-9/11 period begins right after the September 11 events. This period is painful for the entire world because terrorism has become a world-wide problem. Emory Elliott rightly points out the fact that "American literature in the twenty-first century will be influenced by the events of that terrible day and by the ways that the United States government responded" (446). Many critics agree that after the

9/11 events a new era of modern literature commenced. For example, in the article "Postmodernism and Islam: Where To After September 11," Akbar S. Ahmed notices that "ideas and practice of multicultural harmony, eclecticism and juxtapositions… were halted in their tracks on 11 September 2001" (140). The critic points out "the symbolism of the attack on the heart of the financial center of the Western world" and "the strike on the Pentagon, the heart of the military might of America," drawing a shocking conclusion: "postmodernism lay buried in the rubble on that fateful day" (140). Although the latter idea may be considered rather controversial, such an opinion may demonstrate the significance of the event. On the other hand, Ahmed's statement that "[i]n many important ways September the 11th was the day the new century began" (140) is true: the tragic event initiated many irreversible changes in the American society and culture. According to Catherine Morley, "the September 11 terrorist attacks engendered a new form of narrative realism, a form of realism born of a frustration with the limits of language as an affective and representative tool" (295). On the other hand, readers expect to read about how Americans identify themselves and how they understand "the Other."

Authors of 9/11 fiction seek to present the reality of post-9/11 America without embellishment, so that the reader is given a possibility of analyzing the causes of 9/11 attacks, comprehending the magnitude of the tragedy or even identifying with the victims. As Catherine Morley rightly points out, "writers integrate an emphasis on the visual image within their fictions thereby offering a heightened version of realism in order to accurately portray the realities of post 9/11 socio-cultural and personal landscapes" (293). Emphasizing the significance of personal surroundings, the authors discuss human consciousness, moral values and attitude towards life and death. People are not afraid of death but of obscurity that leads to it. Attitude to death is expressed through two different perspectives. The first is the death of innocent people, who had appeared in the wrong place and time. In this case, the authors focus on the emotional state of the victims' relatives, their thoughts and explanations, and "flashbulb memories" (Rader 1). The second aspect is the death of terrorists, their reasons for choosing such destiny and their contemplations and/or preparations for the act of terrorism. The destructive binary thinking is represented through different paradigms: "Life and Death," "Us and Them," and also "Then/Before and Now." Karine Ancellin observes that "[t]hese novels offer visions of the past which are alive and lingering, while the present remains difficult to settle into" and the future is still obscure (8).

One of the features of 9/11 literature is the writer's attempt to disclose a global conflict which arises from deepening social and cultural contrasts. Authors often try to reveal the distinction between two different cultures, between obedience and faith as opposed to American modernism and consumerism. A great number of novelists disclose the conflict between the American way of living and Islamic culture, religion, and jihad.

The theme of self-destruction often dominates in the 9/11 novels: confusion, felt in the society, is transferred into the novel. The main character is sad and disappointed in the society and its moral values. Often the protagonist is lonely, misunderstood, seeking to answer all their inner questions; s/he is different from the rest of society. Consequently, the inner conflict leads to self-destruction, which

happens in various forms and, finally, is represented in the overall tragedy. The main character (for example, the survivor) may be described not as a victim but as a real hero, who succeeded in living through or rescued others.

The 9/11 fiction often includes criticism of the consumerist society and the overpowering role of the mass media. The novelists discuss social inequality, the lack of morality and harsh real-life situations. Thus, the aim of a 9/11 novel is to reveal the tragedy not only of one character, but of any culture or phenomenon in general. The images of the falling Towers and then the absence of these buildings build up the imagination of the society and determine the possible attitudes to future events. The absence of the Twin Towers was replaced, as E. Ann Kaplan states, by "other images—of burning people jumping out of the Towers, of firemen rushing to rescue people… of the huge cloud of smoke" (13). These images are depicted in the recollections of witnesses and the relatives of the victims who died during the attacks. Direct representations of the 9/11 attacks often appear in the novels; these representations echo TV reports and documentaries: for example, as Catherine Morley points out, "[m]any writers describe their impotence in terms of their being frozen in front of the television screen or, in the case of the New York writers, from some city vantage point" (295). The petrifaction watching the latest news is a frequent feature of 9/11 fiction.

The personalization of 9/11 events builds up a sense of truthfulness and reliability. Readers encounter narratives about losses and tragedies that are similar to their own. Alienation, doubts, disappointment or tense family relationships, antagonistic processes in the Muslim communities and society are all significant features of 9/11 literature. In 9/11 novels writers seek to reveal different types of family members: responsible, detached, wandering, asking, considering, unprepared for the challenges of the reality or questioning the altered circumstances. Family relationships are often stressful: family members lack communicative skills, feeling lonely and spiritually wounded.

The language and style of 9/11 novels may itself represent a particular feature: many writers have chosen the main character's point of view, so that "the language deals obliquely with 9/11 through the precise attention to the laws of grammar and language in a monologue.... Scrutinizing every verb tense and grammatical configuration, the narrator is preoccupied with life, death, existence" (Morley 300). The language in the 9/11 novel emphasizes the importance of each detail; it becomes a necessity to portray the tragic day and its aftermath as accurately as possible. The stylistic means contain a strikingly realistic aspect, allowing the readers to acknowledge the terrifying realistic paradigm of "Before" and "After."

The Aftermath: The Tragedy of Loss in Laila Halaby's Novel *Once in a Promised Land*

The plot of the novel begins on September 11, 2001, the day when the terrorist attacks in New York City, Arlington, and Pennsylvania occur. Even though the personal traumas which the main characters, Salwa and Jassim, have to deal with are not directly caused by 9/11, Halaby constructs the plot in such a way that this event becomes the beginning of all their struggles and problems. 9/11 undoubtedly affects

Salwa and Jassim psychologically; moreover, they experience the consequences of the changing attitudes towards Arab and Muslim people in the American society. Thus, 9/11 becomes the turning point when the lives of both characters change significantly.

Before 9/11, the protagonists of the novel had led balanced and comfortable lives. During their nine years in the United States of America, Salwa and Jassim have been able to attain luxury, which is reflected in the house and other possessions they own. The house in the quiet and beautiful district, a "glinty Mercedes," and "leather shoes" indicate their wealthy and secure life. This shows that Salwa and Jassim have been accepted into the American society, managed to find well-paid jobs, and assimilated into the American way of life (Halaby 22-23). An almost idyllic picture of the family life suggests predictability and stability which are created by Jassim's status in the American society before 9/11. The tragic day marks the point when both of the protagonists start losing control of their lives. Already in the prologue of the novel titled "Before," Halaby emphasizes the significance of this event for Salwa and Jassim:

> Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center.
>
> Nothing and everything. (Halaby VII-VIII)

The chosen title of the prologue, "Before," emphasizes the contrasted periods in the lives of the main characters. Discussing this contrast and its representation in fiction, Arthur G. Neal rightly notices that this "was a day when the world changed" and that the "distinction between 'before and after' became ingrained in the consciousness of Americans" (180). Similarly, Halaby implies that before 9/11, Salwa and Jassim were not exceptional; they were just like millions of other immigrants living in the United States of America. Moreover, the author also emphasizes the inevitability of Salwa and Jassim being blamed for what happened in New York City. Even though they both have no connection to the terrorists who are responsible for the 9/11 attacks, due to the fact that Salwa and Jassim are of the same ethnicity and religion, they cannot avoid the backlash and animosity which follows the event. 9/11 also signifies the end of calm and peaceful life for Salwa and Jassim. This is how Halaby constructs the beginning of the aftermath for Jassim: "Today, a day that changed everything, Jassim cleared his mind, forced away thoughts of work, of preoccupations, and relaxed for the last time for many years to come, letting his thoughts go where they wished" (Halaby 5). The statement proves that the day has had tragic outcomes for all the members of the American society, including Arab and Muslim communities. Before the attacks, Jassim and Salwa's life was secure and balanced, while immediately later on that day the life of the couple changes dramatically. Their peaceful environment and life in the American Dream suddenly deteriorate. Therefore, 9/11 serves as a turning point which starts a new period of struggles, and whose consequences will haunt the protagonists throughout the novel.

Halaby depicts the American society's initial reactions to 9/11, using both informational and empathic approaches as outlined by Laurie Vickroy (183-185). Alongside some information on the events, Halaby supplies the reader with subtle

interpretation and discussion of the outcomes, focusing on empathic discussion of the change of life of the protagonists. As Arthur G. Neal notices, the events caused panic and fear in the American society (180). In the novel the emotional reaction of American people makes a strong impact on the main character's feelings:

> Today Jassim was glad to be alone, to unwind from a chaotic day of too many phone calls, one emergency staff meeting, one emergency consultation. Since Tuesday, [September 11] his usually predictable job had been the focus of panicked people anticipating bombs and poison in their water supply. Demanding fluidity in service. Pleading for security. (Halaby 24)

American people start feeling vulnerable, and this results in panic and overreaction. Furthermore, Jassim's job becomes unpredictable; the normal routine is disturbed by the terrified people anticipating more catastrophes. If previously no one had seen Jassim's work (he is a hydrologist, working in a company dealing with the supply of water) as potentially dangerous, after 9/11, people's panic results in their seeing threats everywhere; therefore, the fact that Jassim is an Arab only worsens the situation in his job. FBI starts an unsubstantiated investigation in search of domestic terrorists, a process which eventually results in Jassim's victimization. Therefore, the loss of his job marks a gradual downfall from the peak of the American Dream.

9/11 has not only resulted in panic and fear, but it has also dramatically increased the American society's hostility and animosity towards Arab and Muslim people. In the novel, both of the protagonists experience the changing attitudes towards their community. Just before the attacks, in the Fitness Bar, Jassim meets Jack Franks, a patriotic American who can be interpreted as the symbolic representation of the American society. During their conversation, Jack shares his experiences: "I went to Jordan once.... Followed my daughter there. She married a Jordanian. Not one like you, though. This one was from the sticks—or the sand, as the case was" (Halaby 6). It can be noticed that even before the 9/11 attacks, Jack considers native Jordanians to be inferior; thus, a certain degree of disdain can be felt in his words. However, it should be noted that Jack excludes Jassim from other Jordanians. Such an opinion signifies that Jassim is perceived as "better," and he is considered to be part of the more superior and advanced American society. Therefore, in the pre-9/11 period, Jassim is an accepted and respected person, and his ethnicity is not associated with danger or terrorism by ordinary American people.

The events of 9/11 change this prevailing neutral attitude, so that, gradually, Jassim and Salwa become excluded from the American society. A few days after the 9/11 attacks, Salwa and Jassim are shopping in the mall when two shop assistants call security because Jassim appears suspicious to them. In one of the girls' explanation, an obvious fear and even a shade of accusation can be felt:

> "He just scared me." Salwa saw that her [the shop assistant's] eyes were enormous. "He just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that's been going on." Here the girl stopped and looked at her [Salwa] as though she were checking to make sure her reference was understood.
> The words slid into Salwa's understanding, narrowing and sharpening her anger.

> "I see. You thought he might want to blow up the mall in his Ferragamo shoes." (Halaby 30)

The shop assistants' reaction points to countless post-9/11 situations when all Arab-Americans were treated as potential threats. Even though Jassim was not doing anything particularly suspicious, except for looking at a motorcycle, the fact that he was an Arab provoked the fear of the two girls. Moreover, the shop assistant's reference to the 9/11 attacks clearly shows that all Arab people are associated with and even blamed for the event. If in the pre-9/11 period Jassim's wealth meant that he was considered to be of a higher social status, after the attacks, he is treated as a terrorist, and his wealthy appearance does not separate him from the extremists. Consequently, Salwa and Jassim's ethnicity becomes a sign of danger and a reason for distrust.

In addition to suspicion and fear, the American society soon begins to express the feelings of hatred and hostility. When Salwa is driving home, she turns on the radio and hears the outburst of an American person: "A man's voice blared out: '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. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us" (Halaby 56). The American society panics and even turns into a paranoid entity; additionally, this panic and paranoia are strongly accompanied by anger and animosity towards Arab and Muslim people. In the above quotation, the man states that the American society is full of Arab terrorists and that Muslim people are dangerous and are waiting to cause more damage. Such a statement suggests that the American society acknowledges Arabs and Muslims as enemies. The man also pronounces the word "Muslims" in a peculiar way in order to emphasize their threatening nature and to express his loathing of them. Furthermore, he mentions the name of Jesus Christ, which can be interpreted as an attempt to emphasize the difference and distance between American and Muslim cultures and religions. Thus, the events of 9/11 significantly worsen the attitudes towards Arab and Muslim people as well as create a tense situation within the society.

Even though both of the protagonists are affected by the increased hostility to a similar extent, their reactions to the American society's response are considerably different. At first, in spite of the palpable tension, Jassim tries to understand the American society and remain calm: "this is new for Americans. They don't know what to do, and they are unexposed to the rest of the world.... Just be patient, habibti [darling]. This will pass" (Halaby 58). Jassim still has faith in American people, feels sympathy for them, and tries to remain optimistic. However, soon Jassim's situation seems to gradually get worse, and, consequently, he becomes a target and is seen as an enemy not only of the American society, but of the government as well. An engineer and a hydrologist, Jassim does not expect any problems in his job: his status has been stable for many years; he is a respected professional in his field and maintains an excellent relationship with the administration of the company. Therefore, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) starts an ungrounded investigation on Jassim (as he works in the company that supplies the city with water), he ultimately gives way to his emotions:

> Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: *with or against.* But was he not *with? I understand American society*, he wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here*. (Halaby 234, emphasis in the original)

Jassim feels disappointed that despite his solidarity and cooperation the American society and the government refuse to see him as an innocent person. Moreover, it can be observed that although Jassim still wants to consider himself as part of the United States of America, he starts feeling hopeless and is unable to fight against the government's policy. As a consequence, Jassim's trust in this country disappears, and the feeling of injustice finally fills its place.

In contrast to Jassim's attempt to remain calm and reasonable in the beginning, his wife's, Salwa's, reaction can be described as more intense and open. Soon after the attacks, she expresses her concern about the possible impact on the Arab community: "Salwa had talked to her friend Randa several times as well, babbling about how horrible it was and how she feared for the repercussion toward Arabs in this country" (Halaby 21). Salwa's worry indicates that she evaluates the situation more realistically than Jassim does and expects the up-coming revenge on Muslim people. However, Salwa's anxiety suggests that due to Muslims' apprehensions about America's backlash against them, her community has also started to feel vulnerable. Salwa does not try to remain optimistic like her husband: instead, she starts to lose her trust in American people and already intuitively knows the problems which will await them in the future.

In addition, the retaliation towards Arabs and those who are associated with them enrages Salwa and she cannot hide her strong emotions. Salwa reacts to a murder of an innocent Sikh particularly sensitively: "Salwa's outrage and sadness was immense. 'What does a Sikh have to do with anything? People are stupid. *Stupid and macho*,' she finished in English" (Halaby 21, emphasis in the original). Salwa's response signifies that she is angry, and the fact that the polarization of the society after 9/11 provokes even more bloodshed makes her extremely sad. Salwa also calls Americans "stupid and macho," which implies the fact that she starts losing her respect for American people and sees them as a potential threat to her and Jassim's safety. Salwa expresses her feelings openly and is much more preoccupied with her and her husband's lives than Jassim.

Salwa and Jassim's encounters with the hostile reactions of the American society are not the only post-9/11 effects which they experience. The event has social and psychological consequences which directly affect the lives of both protagonists. When the FBI starts the investigation on Jassim, his boss Marcus, who is on Jassim's side at first, reveals that their interest in him is influenced by Jassim's co-workers Bella and Lisa:

> after September 11, Bella and Lisa were both really angry. They wanted to get revenge and they wanted to be involved in that revenge.... It didn't take long before they landed on you. Bella called FBI on you a couple of days after it happened, told them you were a rich Arab with access to the city's water supply and you didn't seem very upset by what had happened. (Halaby 271)

Anger and hatred which start dominating in the post-9/11 American society become a serious threat to his social position. Jassim's co-workers turn against him, and the environment in which he previously had been respected and felt safe suddenly becomes filled with vengeful feelings and discrimination. Moreover, the fact that Jassim is an Arab has direct consequences on the firm in which Jassim works: "Marcus hung up the phone. Never in his life had he felt so torn. This was his third call from clients who no longer wanted Jassim working for them" (Halaby 268). Thus, the aftermath of 9/11 becomes uncontrollable and has a direct impact not only on Jassim himself, but also on the people he is related to: Jassim's boss and friend Marcus and his firm. As a result, Jassim eventually loses his job, and his social status as well as his life-style are endangered.

In addition, 9/11 undoubtedly affects Jassim psychologically. The routine activities which were previously part of his daily life are disturbed by the images of the events. Although he still does not realize it, Jassim's mind unconsciously questions the present situation and poses doubts about the future of his life in the host country, the United States of America. These doubts will become more prominent when Jassim will be dealing with his personal trauma; however, it should be noted that 9/11 can be interpreted as the beginning of a realization that this host country could no longer be considered to be his true home. The impact of 9/11 on Salwa is similar to Jassim's situation. She also experiences problems in her work when a client refuses to be serviced by her:

> The woman continued to stare at her as though Salwa's face were interrupting her thoughts....
>
> "Where are you from?" asked the woman.
>
> "I am Palestinian from Jordan."
>
> The woman continued to look at her. Chewed it over. Spat it back out....
>
> "I think I'd like to work with someone else." (Halaby 113-14)

The distrust and hostility towards Arabs have resulted in discrimination processes which spread in the post-9/11 period. In the above quote, the woman's reaction shows that cooperation and mutual understanding between Americans and Muslims have become problematic: in the above example, the woman humiliates Salwa with her rejection. Gradually, Salwa starts seeing the United States of America from a different perspective; American people's animosity towards her community changes her perception of the American society: "Who 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" (Halaby 58, emphasis in the original). Salwa implies that the American government might be using 9/11 as a pretext to expand their political power in the Middle East, and such a possibility increases her disapproval and, at the same time, suggests that she accuses Americans of an attempt to create a conflict situation in other parts of the world. Consequently, such an opinion results in Salwa's gradual withdrawal from the American society.

After the attacks, Salwa starts seeing her life differently: "thoughts bustled through her brain, scrutinizing the life she was living. *Denying reality*. *That's what I've been doing*. *Killing time, not living*" (Halaby 5, emphasis in the original). Such

contemplation indicates that Salwa starts realizing that her life in the United States has not been as idyllic as she had thought or imagined. She has a feeling that all the years spent in her host country were only an illusion of a happy and balanced life, and that she has been missing something all the time.

Additionally, the American society's post-9/11 treatment of Arabs and Muslims results in Salwa's evaluation of the differences between her and American culture:

> [Salwa was] struck by how readily people shared intimate secrets with others but how emotionally distant they seemed, how they didn't connect the way people at home did.... In the past month that distance had been stronger, an aftereffect of what had happened in New York and Washington, like cars sprouting American flags from their windows, antennas to God, electric fences willing her to leave. (Halaby 54)

The fact that American people cannot offer her the same attachment as in Jordan only emphasizes an increasing distance and polarization. Furthermore, in Salwa's mind, hatred expressed towards her, Jassim, and the whole Muslim community starts to turn into a request or demand to leave the United States of America. The patriotism, which is influenced by the national trauma and occupies the country after the attacks, does not provoke the feeling of solidarity for Salwa; on the contrary, she feels estranged and unwanted. Thus, 9/11 significantly changes Salwa's perception of her life in the United States. Eventually, Salwa's miscarriage considerably alters her life. This event affects the protagonist psychologically by engendering extreme sadness which is gradually replaced by the feeling of emptiness and demotivation. Salwa's loss symbolizes the collapse of her American Dream; however, this helps her see the real world she lives in and evaluate herself and her priorities differently.

9/11 has brought an unconscious understanding to both Jassim and Salwa that the United States of America is slowly ceasing to be their home. Although during the first months after the 9/11 attacks Jassim tries to ignore the American society's backlash against him and Arab and Muslim communities, he can no longer deny the harsh reality. The protagonist's trauma uncovers his desire for safety and predictability, thus raising doubts about the life in his dream country and evoking longing for his true home in Jordan. In this way, 9/11 relates to both protagonists' tragedies; consequently, the national trauma results in the personal traumas of the main characters, destroying safety, stability, dreams, and relationships. In the novel, Salwa has to deal with the trauma of loss when she miscarries her baby. Moreover, Salwa's trauma results not only in the psychological problems and the deteriorating relationship with her husband, but also in the adultery with her co-worker Jake. Meanwhile, Jassim kills a boy named Evan in a car accident, and, although he was not able to avoid the accident and is declared innocent, Jassim is traumatized by this event and no longer manages to control his life. The relationship with his wife is also affected, and Jassim searches for comfort in a new relationship with a waitress called Penny.

Even though all three traumatic events—9/11, Salwa's miscarriage, and Jassim's car accident—are separate incidents, there exists a clear connection between these tragedies. This connection is reflected in the fact that Tuesday (September 11)

becomes the day when both protagonists experience the biggest disturbances of their lives: the 9/11 attacks occur, Salwa tells her husband about her miscarriage, and Jassim kills a boy in a car accident. It can be noticed that the order and peace which is broken on September 11th is never regained, and the tragic events in New York City, Arlington, and Pennsylvania start a sequence of events which work as a cause-effect chain and increasingly complicate the lives of the main characters. Hence, 9/11 can be treated as a symbolic event because the fall of the Twin Towers is followed by the fall of Salwa and Jassim's lives.

The aftermath reactions and split of the American society result in a deep uncrossable chasm between the main characters, Jassim and Salwa. Predictability, stability, and peaceful order which dominated in their lives before the attacks are gradually replaced by hostility, maltreatment, discrimination, and a sense of insecurity. In addition, 9/11 has social and psychological consequences for both of the protagonists. Hatred, suspicion, and desire for revenge on "the Other," which spread in the post-9/11 American society, have a strong impact on the lives of the main characters.

Conclusion

The traumatic events of September 11, 2001, have been widely represented in 9/11 literature that contains both direct and indirect references to the events of the day. The issues described in the analysis of Laila Halaby's novel *Once in A Promised Land* point to the overall egocentrism of the American society, described in many ways and forms in contemporary fiction. Alongside the themes of terrorism, moral and physical destruction or the degradation of the American society, Laila Halaby elaborates on the social divide and antagonism which started in the aftermath and critically views the possibilities for mutual understanding. The novel may be interpreted as an example of a text showing how the American society can emerge into the chain of discriminating reactions towards "the Other." Taking up both the informational and empathic approaches to describe the personal traumas of the main characters, Laila Halaby portrays the polarization of the American society, an indelible process, which has had on-going consequences.

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