

**Within the Hybrid Imagination: Muslim Women's Agency after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *once in a Promised Land***

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**Abstract**

In literary imaginations, Muslim women are frequently portrayed as disempowered, oppressed, and devalued by Muslim men, submissive to their husbands with no equal rights, utterly neglected by their parents and mistreated as daughters-in-law, and, most notably, always kept at home and under the veil of ignorance. Some Muslim authors, however, strayed from these Orientalist, neo-Orientalist, and postcolonial depictions of Muslim women. Islamophobia escalated after the September 11 attacks, resulting in Muslims being exposed to othering, profiling, discrimination, and physical and verbal abuse. The post-9/11 public power discourse and Islamophobic social rhetoric that accompanied the War on Terrorism produced a narrative of destroying terrorism, instituting democracy, and freeing burqa-clad Muslim women from patriarchal and religious restrictions. After 9/11, the fictional works of Western authors propagated negative preconceptions of Islam and Muslims. This portrayal intentionally eliminated any prospective Muslim female characters, so developing and endorsing the non-entity persona of Muslim women who have little place, position, and role in the public arena, and are therefore not worth depicting. In contrast, Muslim authors presented the flip side of the coin to contradict this widespread misunderstanding and stereotyping of Muslims and Islam. This research paper investigates the portrayal of Muslim women in post-9/11 literature, giving special reference to the novel *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby.

**Key words:** trauma, 9/11, hybridity, agency, orientalism

**Introduction**

Muslim women in the United States who wear a headscarf are imprisoned in the nexus of Islamophobia, racialised Islamophobia, and sexism in the post-9/11 era. In contrast to their male counterparts, they regularly face discrimination that is not adequately addressed by Muslim civil rights groups, women's rights groups, or civil liberties organisations. It is essential to emphasise from the outset that there is no single, united Muslim woman who can represent the experiences and concerns of all Muslim women. These women are of varied racial and cultural backgrounds, hold divergent political views, and adhere to a spectrum of religious fundamentalism to pure secularism. Despite this, individuals' Muslim identities regularly expose them to unpleasant interactions because they are mistakenly portrayed as shy, powerless, destitute, or, after September 11, as sympathetic to terrorism. Due to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Muslim women of all races and levels of religiosity endure prejudice at the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and gender. The debate no longer centres on whether the offensive veil oppresses women by limiting their sexuality and, by extension, their

freedoms and life choices, or whether it represents choice, liberty, and empowerment. Instead, it now identifies them as members of the suspicious, inherently dangerous, and perpetually foreign terrorist other living among us. Because most Americans view Islam as inherently foreign, the majority of female Anglo converts to Islam are classified as Arab, particularly if they wear the headscarf. Examining the nuances of their experiences illustrates the special challenges they face as Muslims, women, and members of racial or ethnic minorities or those perceived as such.

## **Discussion**

The location and status of Muslim women have been a subject of contention and reformulation. Diverse scholarly representations from distinct epistemic theoretical positions and perspectives have attempted to analyse it. The colonisers utilised the image of the veiled woman to legitimise the invasion and subsequent control in the name of the white man's duty to civilise the uncivilised and uncultured locals and free oppressed Muslim women. Academically, this narrative was questioned by the postcolonial critique. Edward Said opposed colonial and Eurocentric historical construct narratives in his seminal 1978 essay *Orientalism*, which challenged the prejudiced interpretation and portrayal of Islam and Muslims as monolithic, conservative, unchanging, and barbaric (Said, 1978). After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the colonial binary between colonisers and colonised — the West and the rest of the world — was re-established. In addition to striking terrorists at their heart, the emancipation of burqa-clad women in Afghanistan gave additional logic and justification for the War on Terror. Some female Muslim authors presented women as docile, degraded, exploited, disenfranchised, and dependant with no active role, so validating the stereotypes formed by the West and the United States regarding the burqa-clad woman of Afghanistan. However, the women who established this reductive literary cliché have carved out a space for themselves as autonomous and distinctive authors in the West. In addition, several Muslim male authors portrayed women as weak, impotent, and apolitical in their fictional works, lending legitimacy to this narrative. Contrary to the canon, several Muslim authors demolished and dispelled this popular idea in their works by showing dynamic, veiled female characters who confidently exercised their agency in both private and public areas.

The image of Muslims has deteriorated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, from sexual, primitive, savage, ignorant, insular, and semi-citizen to insane, fundamentalist, bloodthirsty, and terrorist. In contrast, Muslim women have been labelled "double-jointed" because they are subject to a patriarchal male-dominated culture and religious restraints that limit her freedom to negotiate her identity. In addition, Western comprador intellectuals supported this notion and emphasised the liberation, emancipation, and salvation of Muslim women. Gayatri Spivak's renowned statement that westerners must rescue brown women from brown men brings the topic to the forefront and evokes rejection.

Muslim males were seen as sexist, violent, and evil-doers, and Muslim ladies were portrayed as subjugated, belly dancers, and harems, according to research conducted prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A study of one hundred American and Canadian television programmes between 1975–1976 and 1983–1984 reveals that the mass media disproportionately degraded the image of Islam and Muslims. Similarly, an examination of 900 Hollywood films demonstrates that Arabs are portrayed as wicked, offensive, and monolithic. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, stereotypes of Muslims and Islam persisted, along with sensationalist hype, naive guesses, erroneous anti-Muslim prejudice, and hate crimes. After the 9/11 attacks, numerous research support media stereotypes of

Muslims and discrimination against Muslims in the United States and the United Kingdom. In addition to emphasising the eradication of terrorism, the War on Terror highlighted the freedom of women from the Taliban and Muslims in Afghanistan and throughout the Muslim world. Due to Islamic injunctions, a discourse has developed that Muslim women lack personal freedom and basic rights.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the repercussions were felt in all areas of politics, the economics, religion, identity, culture, and literature. Muslims were stereotyped, discriminated against, and physically and verbally mistreated throughout the West. In addition to the rampant xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Muslim public rhetoric, American and European authors published fiction that stigmatised and demonised Islam and Muslims after September 11th. It defamed and manipulated Islam and Muslims in general, but it is important to note that no potential Muslim female character was ever portrayed in these works in order to assert and construct the image that the Muslim woman is completely dependent, deprived, disenfranchised, and helpless, thus her non-existent state is not deserving of representation. It promoted the assumption that Muslim women lacked the autonomy to fulfil their public obligations. Muslim authors portrayed Muslim men and women as moderate, educated, independent, knowledgeable, and peace-loving to counter and debunk these widespread stereotypes and Islamophobic power discourse. This research paper investigates the subject of traumatised Muslim female agency as it is mediated in private and public discourses .

A woman's agency is compromised, limited, and passive in a patriarchal society. Ahmed (1992) asserts that Islam is "innately and immutably oppressive to women" and that this oppression is customised through "the veil" and "segregation" (152). This segregation deprives women of the ability to negotiate and assert their autonomy in public spheres. Derrida argues in *Spurs* that when a woman is prevented from performing her role in public and private spaces, she ceases to exist and becomes a "non-identity" and "out-distancing of distance" figure (Derrida, 1978, p. 49). He refers to such a state as "the veiled movement," in which a woman's status is likely that of a "non-figure" or "a simulacrum" (p.49), and as a result, her "determinable identity" is compromised and she hides behind a "golden-embroidered veil" (P. 51)

Irigaray argues that a woman conditioned in a masculine society imbibes "the shame that demands vicious conformity." The notion gets constructed in the deep recesses of her consciousness that the "usefulness" of a "woman's body" lies only in being covered. When it is removed, she feels "empty" because her deficiency as a non-male is exposed, and as a result, she becomes an untruth when uncovered (Irigaray, 1985, p. 115). She further establishes that "woman weaves in order to veil herself, mask the faults of Nature, and restore her to wholeness." By wrapping her up" (p. 115). It implies that religion and patriarchy implant the notion in a woman's consciousness that the veil and segregation can only conceal her inherent natural deficiency.

Any attempt to unveil the woman is futile because she feels unfinished without it. Meyda Yegenoglu argues that forcibly removing a woman's clothing is equivalent to "peeling her skin off," and that even the slightest intrusion is painful (Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 118). Spivak contends that in the state of being unveiled, a woman experiences herself as a "other" and that "she does not really exist, but her name remains one of the important names for displacement, the special mark of deconstruction" (Spivak, 1999, p. 184). In *Algeria Unveiled*, Fanon asserts, "Without the veil, she has an impression that her body being cut into bits, put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely ... The unveiled body seems

to escape, to dissolve. She has an impression of being improperly dressed or even of being naked. She experiences a sense of incompleteness with great intensity. She has an anxious feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful sense of disintegrating'' (Fanon, 1965, p. 59).

Bhabha posits that an individual's passive agency becomes active upon encountering a third space, which provides the opportunity to reconsider and reevaluate the individual's agency, role, and choice. He calls it the "insider's outsideness" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 20). When the cultures of the colonisers and the colonised paved the way for hybridity and third space, it was highly relevant to the postcolonial context.

Post 9/11 power discourse and Islamophobic social rhetoric, which followed the attacks, denigrated not only Muslim males, but also created the public perception that Muslims subjugated, oppressed, disenfranchised, marginalised, and confined their females, preventing them from exercising their agency or playing their role in private and public space. After equating Islam and Muslims with terrorism, the image of burqa-clad females was propagated to justify the War on Terrorism for the eradication of terrorism and emancipation of Muslim females from Muslim males – or, in Spivak's words, the West must "save brown women from brown men" (Khan, 2002, p.ix). In accordance with tradition, the United States utilised the narrative that was asserted by Orientalist and neo-Orientalist authors and later exploited by colonisers to justify their colonial rule. The selected post-9/11 fiction by Muslim female authors dispels this perception and depicts Muslim women as more responsible, independent, active, and decisive.

*Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby can be considered the first effort by an Arab American novelist to illuminate the effects of 9/11 on Arab-Americans. The story goes to extremes by exposing and analysing the psychological, political, social, economic, and cultural consequences of these events, along with the confused notions of citizenship and identity. In addition, depictions of gender, class, geography, and socio-political dimensions of the post-9/11 trauma are discussed. *Once in a Promised Land* focuses mainly on the disintegrating marriage of an Arab American couple (Salwa and Jassim) during the turbulent years following 9/11. On the one hand, Jassim, the Jordanian male protagonist with a doctorate in hydrology, is an expert in water quality control for a consultancy firm.

On the other hand, Salwa is the female protagonist whose career as a banker and real estate agent afforded her a life of wealth and luxury that she would never have experienced in her native Jordan. Salwa and Jassim are a financially and socially secure couple who reside in Tucson, Arizona. Neither of them belongs to either the Jordanian or the American culture since they are always attempting to carve out a place for themselves but are met with social rejection and exclusion, resulting in their hybrid identities.

The novel establishes the active, courageous, and spirited role of Muslim female members, who exercise their agency in both private and public spheres. It has been demonstrated that women suffer more in the aftermath of attacks than men. Salwa, who was born in America but raised in Palestine and Jordan, immigrates to the United States after marrying Jassim, a hydrologist. She actively assimilates into the identity of the host country and lives an independent, responsible, and confident life. Her timid, reticent, and retiring demeanour becomes bold and outgoing, and her formal dress code becomes less formal, tighter, and more revealing. Her personal and professional demeanour evolves

in a linear fashion, and she carries out her official responsibilities with effective efficiency. In addition to her bank job, she also runs a part-time real estate business: the former finance-related job requires responsibility, while the latter requires public interaction and transactions. In accordance with the customs and tenets of the culture and society in which she was raised, such attributes and qualities are typically expected and associated with a male partner, but she carries out such significant responsibilities with a great deal of responsibility, positivity, and efficiency. After the attacks, when a female client refuses to conduct a banking transaction with Salwa due to her "Palestinian" nationality, she demonstrates great restraint, prudence, and professional composure. She smiles "her sweetest smile, the one that would force her to believe that this woman was only asking out of curiosity" (Halaby, 2007, p. 115).

Salwa counteracts the American lady's chauvinistic arrogance, xenophobic hatred, and Islamophobic feelings with forbearance, compassion, and tolerance. Muslim women do not isolate themselves after the attacks; rather, they openly confront and endure discrimination and othering in order to continue surviving in the tense host country. Jassim and his American girlfriend, Penny, encounter an Arabic woman in Wal-Mart, and Penny remarks, "I bet people give her a lot of grief these days" (p. 279).

Salwa shares the belief that Americans have become "stupid and macho" and they mistreat Muslims indiscriminately (p. 21). She not only actively employs her agency in the private sphere, but also considers her personal domain to be political. After the attacks, she becomes concerned about her unborn child. "It is different now, she thought. If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here" changed, she thought. (p. 54).

In addition, she questions her husband's excessive dedication and focus on work at the expense of his attention towards her: "Jassim's enthusiasm for his work and in his offer of the life she wanted, he had somehow neglected her" (p. 99). It demonstrates that Muslim women exist individually and strive to carve out a place for themselves in every personal, public, professional, and political realm despite obstacles and difficulties.

Salwa becomes pregnant without her husband's consent because he is unwilling to father children even after nine years of marriage. In a patriarchal society, giving birth to children is a man's responsibility, but she asserts her autonomy to make such a crucial decision on her own without the permission of a man in a position of authority; furthermore, she "acts" by not taking her birth control pills for four days. When her pregnancy is confirmed in a hospital, she continues to sob and mutter in her car, "wishing Jassim were next to her," and "tears she released had been blocking tiny crevices that held bubbles of anger and resentment, packed tight so as not to surface, but now it all spilled out" (p. 60).

However, after giving birth, she feels that her "emptiness" has been filled, and she sleeps "in peace" (p. 11). Unfortunately, the pregnancy ends in miscarriage, and she becomes the "mother of buckets of blood" without telling her husband or seeking assistance (p. 160).

In such a difficult circumstance, she seeks the assistance of another woman, Randa, whose "fingers pushed and prodded, held on tightly when the cramping was painful, and wiped away the tears with gentleness" (p. 91).

Negotiating and addressing such critical issues without male intervention demonstrates a woman's confidence and independence. Salwa lies on a bed, bereft and torn, following the miscarriage. Under cover of the truth, she reevaluates, reviews, and revisits her plans: "This was the life she had chosen, but it was not the life she wanted" (p. 91). She explores new horizons in life from analysing her decision, its subsequent repercussions, and its failure.

After a period of recuperation, she resumes her professional duties with a heavy heart, as her desire to become a mother in the third space of the host country without male consent has left her grievously wounded. With a "Head filled with loathing," she prepares "for the morning, for the day, for the American workweek with no energy, no interest" (p. 265).

She meets Jake Peralta, a co-worker at the bank, and tries to find momentary solace in his company, but limits are inadvertently crossed and they consummate their relationship physically. When Jack enquires about her belief in the Quranic proclamation "when a man and a woman are alone, the Devil makes a third party," she concedes and refers to their meeting as "Like this one." (p. 208).

As soon as she loses her celibacy, she is jolted awake by her complete existential annihilation. She feels physically devastated, nationally uprooted, and spiritually contaminated, as well as manipulated and maligned in the host country, but she refuses to surrender. She desires a visit to her native land in order to regain her strength and vitality. She goes to bid Jake farewell when she decides to temporarily leave the United States, but he attacks her and leaves her gravely injured. After regaining consciousness, she is groaning in a hospital as she records her final statement. Jassim realises, as he sits beside her hospital bed, that American ignorance and soil have tainted Salwa's innocence. However, her character disproves the Western notion that Muslim women are subjugated, dependent, and marginalised.

Salwa is an autonomous, self-directed, and decisive woman. She makes decisions throughout her life, and due to her hamartia, she meets a tragic end; however, she is a fully developed character. She is left morally exploited, physically assaulted, and spiritually devastated as a result of her reliance on the host country to maintain equilibrium following the attacks and miscarriage of her child. Additionally, *Once in A Promised Land* dispels the myth that the white man saves the brown woman from the brown man. Here, the white man is the perpetrator and not the saviour. It also debunks the claim of the American president that "Americans were democracy to places that knew only tyranny and terror, that didn't have the freedom to choose" (p. 280). Halaby contradicts the widely held belief of Nafisi (2003) that the West is a safe haven for Muslim women.

## **Conclusion**

The selected Muslim post-9/11 fiction dispels Islamophobic notions and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and depicts the female characters as independent, equally assimilable members of the host society's culture. They do not conform to the image of a woman wearing a burqa that has been propagated by Orientalist, neo-Orientalist, and postcolonial writers in the West and followed by some Muslim intellectual compradors. Edward Said refuted this reductionist trope in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Later on, some Muslim writers went their separate ways and attempted to portray the Muslim woman as a powerful agent in the private and public spheres. Consequently, the selected post-9/11

fiction does not adhere to the cliched and stereotypical narratives of Orientalist, neo-Orientalist, and post-colonial authors. Transcending these "forked models" or tell-a-tale formula, known and established in the minds of western readers and the English literary canon, *Once in A Promised Land* depicts Muslim protagonist as independent and unique, which is not a "ironic compromise" to sacrifice the veracity of narration and produce a truth that may be "human and not wholly human" (Bhabha, 1994, 122).

Adhering to the already established literary canon or image fixed in the minds of readers expedites acceptance at the expense of reality and truth. "I believe that a rich and critical 9/11 literature should begin where Euro-American narcissism ends," says Liao (2013). (p.19). The selected fiction neither tarnishes nor subjectively celebrates Muslim women's images. The protagonist is portrayed as unique individual with flaws and strengths. The United States provides her with a third space to reconsider her roles and reevaluate their agency; as a result, they become more mature and accountable. As a result of her upbringing in a patriarchal and male-dominated society, where power and authority are always delegated to men, she faces many obstacles while assimilating. The protagonist faces similar restrictions and situations in the host country, but she develops her own personality and emerge as individuals with their own convictions. She is characterised as being independent, decisive, and free and makes independent decisions and strive to carve out a niche in the host country. The protagonist analysed here are raised in an Islamic and patriarchal society, but neither is oppressed by "the veil" or "segregation" (Ahmed, 1992, p.152).

They fulfil their respective roles in the third space of the West independently, effectively, and fruitfully. Salwa conceives a child and develops an extramarital relationship with Jake. Contrary to Derridean belief, they transcend the "non-identity" persona, and their dealings and interactions with the outside world are more promising and pragmatic, as opposed to merely frivolous and gossipy. They are not a part of "the veiled movement" (Derrida, 1978, p. 49), but they have a clear sense of agency and choice. Spivak's desire to save "brown women from brown men" (Khan, 2002, p.ix) and hollow claims of waging the War on Terrorism for rescuing burqa-clad Muslim women fail when Salwa was injured in the heart of white man's land. Despite persecution, othering, and physical assaults, she emerges as unique, independent, and decisive beings who exercise their agency. Salwa defend their culture and religion, observe religious obligations such as iddat, remove the veil when necessary, reject extramarital relationships, and earn a respectable living in a highly charged and transformed host country without male intervention or dependence.

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