

**THE LOSS OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN LAILA HALABY'S
"ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND."**

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve into the exploration of the theme of 'female identity loss' in Laila Halaby's novel "*Once in a Promised Land.*" Focusing on the main character, Salwa, an Arab American, the paper investigates the challenges she faces and the transformation of her identity in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and her extramarital affair with an American coworker. Two significant aspects are highlighted to underscore the loss of Salwa's female identity in the novel: her marriage, reflective of traditional patriarchal norms, and her relationship with Jake, signifying her involvement in an extramarital affair. Furthermore, the examination extends to the portrayal of the post-9/11 Arab American experience in the novel. This exploration sheds light on the lingering issues surrounding exile and expatriation, revealing the persistent challenges faced by individuals within the Arab-American diaspora. The novel serves as a lens through which to analyze these issues, contributing to a broader understanding of the complex intersections of identity, cultural dynamics, and societal expectations in the aftermath of a significant historical event.

Keywords: Female Identity, patriarchy, diaspora, terrorist attacks, vulnerability

Introduction

The concept of "identity" is a compelling and significant notion in today's world, representing an attribute or characteristic that transcends differences. It encompasses how individuals perceive themselves and how society perceives them. Laila Halaby's novel, '*Once in a Promised Land,*' holds particular intrigue, especially in the context of post-9/11 America. As

an Arab American herself, Halaby offers a unique perspective on the immigrant experience, portraying a vivid image of America, both in general and within the post-9/11 era. The novel delves into the complexities of identity, a theme particularly pronounced for immigrants who often grapple with a sense of loss, especially concerning their identity. While identity typically reflects one's self, nation, and culture, the dynamic shifts when immigrants seek to assimilate and integrate the culture of the land where they settle. Halaby skillfully explores this phenomenon, particularly within the context of Arab American immigrants, as depicted in *Once in a Promised Land*. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of post-9/11 America, presenting the challenges faced by Arab Americans who find themselves caught between their own cultural roots and the culture of the land where they reside. This cultural and identity struggle becomes especially pronounced in the aftermath of 9/11, underscoring the tension and confusion experienced by Arab Americans as they navigate their dual identities.

The impact of the 9/11 attacks went beyond the realm of American security, as highlighted in Maha El Said's article "*The Face Of The Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post 9/11*." The aftermath of 9/11 brought about a profound and disastrous personal change for Arab Americans. In addition to the broader concerns for the security and well-being of the United States, Arab Americans were confronted with intense personal dilemmas. The attacks prompted Arab Americans to grapple with a dual burden — a deep sense of sorrow for their country's tragedy and, simultaneously, the responsibility to defend and preserve their own Arabic culture and traditions. This internal conflict reflects the complexity of the Arab American experience post-9/11, where individuals found themselves torn between a sense of allegiance to their American homeland and the need to safeguard their cultural identity in the face of increased scrutiny and stereotypes. The events of 9/11 not only shaped the collective narrative but also imposed unique challenges on Arab Americans as they navigated the intricate intersections of personal and cultural identity in the aftermath of the attacks.

The loss of identity in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent challenges faced by Arab Americans, as portrayed through characters like Salwa in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, is evident in various upheavals. Salwa's character, grappling with the complexities of the post-9/11 era, experiences a notable loss of female identity, exemplified by her actions within two key relationships depicted in the novel. Firstly, Salwa's relationship with her husband illustrates the impact of marital patriarchy, contributing to the erosion of her identity. The internal conflict she faces regarding her desire for motherhood, the suppression of her aspirations within the marriage, and the silence she maintains on crucial decisions all underscore the subjugation of her personal identity within the framework of the marital relationship. Secondly, the extramarital affair between Salwa and Jake becomes another dimension of her identity loss. This relationship outside of marriage challenges cultural norms and underscores the clash between her personal desires and societal expectations. The affair, marked by secrecy and internal struggles, further emphasizes the complexity of Salwa's identity in the context of the post-9/11 challenges faced by Arab Americans.

In essence, Laila Halaby's novel provides a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted ways in which identity loss manifests for female characters like Salwa within the intricate web of cultural, societal, and personal dynamics in the aftermath of 9/11.

The novel revolves around a Jordanian couple living in the United States, leading a seemingly typical American life. However, their lives take a dramatic turn following the 9/11

attacks on the World Trade Towers, coupled with other personal events that significantly impact their experience in the U.S. One pivotal moment occurs when Salwa becomes pregnant against her husband Jassim's wishes. Another event involves Jassim hitting a boy, Evan Parker, who happened to be "an anti-Arab" guy; he "raved about how Arabic people should all be kicked out of this country, rounded up, herded up, and thrown out" (Halaby, 200). These events contribute to the gradual loss of Salwa's identity. The narrative portrays her first assumption that American freedom automatically guarantees the fulfillment of her wishes. However, the reality is starkly different. Salwa, who "had not thought to fine-tune her wishes and had just assumed that fulfillment would come along automatically with American freedom. Tucked in the word freedom, somewhere near the double e, was the code that for a husband to offer his wife the freedom to do as she pleased" (Halaby, 99), encapsulates the nuanced challenges Salwa faces as a woman seeking her own identity within the confines of her marriage and the cultural shifts triggered by external events. As Salwa experiences a sense of loss within herself and her relationship with her husband, she ultimately contemplates returning to her homeland to reclaim her culture and identity. This decision is influenced by the guidance of her close friend Randa, illustrating the profound impact of personal and cultural struggles on the characters in the novel as follows:

Salwa, listen to me. You need to go home for a little while. You need to be with your mother and sisters." And your culture, where things like this can't happen. But this thought she withheld, for not everyone in the room needed to be so forthcoming. "It will help you to see things as they are, and it's been years since you visited. Right now is a good time. Look, a lot has happened in the last few months, and being home will be good for you (Halaby, 288).

The Marital Patriarchy as it Exposes the Loss of Salwa's Identity.

Although the first portrayal of Jassim and Salwa's relationship is characterized by love and mutual understanding, a closer examination reveals the underlying disruption caused by Jassim's internalized dominance over Salwa. The couple appears to share a clear understanding of domestic responsibilities, extending to tasks such as cooking, which is clear in their shared efforts at home. However, the true dynamics emerge when Salwa expresses her desire to conceive and have a child. Jassim, feeling unprepared for fatherhood, believes it is not the right time to expand their family. This difference in perspectives leads to internal conflict for Salwa, notably regarding the use or stopping of birth control pills. The internal struggle is depicted as:

It was not *I didn't take my birth control pill* but instead a much more colorful *For a few years now I've felt that I've been missing something in my life. That's why I got a real estate license. It wasn't enough, though. I think having a child will fill that void. I am going to try to get pregnant, even though Jassim says he doesn't want a child.* (10)

Salwa, driven by her dream of becoming a mother, finds herself in a challenging position within her marriage. Despite her desire to stop using birth control pills, she hesitates to tell this wish to Jassim and instead chooses to lie, claiming she is still taking them. This decision reflects a power imbalance in their relationship, with Salwa feeling compelled to conform to Jassim's wishes. In this patriarchal dynamic, Salwa's identity and decisions are marginalized, and she becomes a silent and seemingly inferior figure to her partner. The patriarchal nature of their

relationship becomes further clear when Salwa, unable to openly express her desire for a child, resorts to getting pregnant without Jassim's knowledge. This secrecy confirms the lack of open communication and shared decision-making in their marriage. The fact that Jassim appears oblivious to Salwa's aspirations as a mother emphasizes a disregard for her identity and desires within the relationship. The loss of Salwa's identity as a wife and a woman is palpable, highlighting the challenges and constraints imposed by a patriarchal framework in their marriage.

Salwa's desire to be a mother is deeply rooted in her cultural background as a Muslim Arab woman. In the context of her identity as both a Muslim and an Arab, the significance and responsibility associated with motherhood carry a weighty cultural and societal expectation. It's crucial to recognize that within Arab culture, particularly in a traditional and patriarchal society, there exists a framework where men often hold the authority to make decisions, and women are expected to adhere to these decisions without significant questioning. In Salwa's case, the conflict arises from the clash between her personal aspirations, influenced by her cultural and religious background, and the patriarchal dynamics that govern decision-making within her society. The tension between her desire for motherhood and the societal expectations placed on her as a woman within a patriarchal context adds complexity to her identity and the choices available to her. This cultural backdrop shapes the narrative of Salwa's struggle and contributes to the broader exploration of identity and agency within the story.

The issue of childbearing is indeed a significant and discussed topic in the Qur'an, and it holds considerable importance in Muslim societies. However, in the case of the Arab American couple, Jassim and Salwa, there is a notable divergence in their thoughts on the matter of having children. Amina Wadud, in her book "*Qur'an and Woman*," clarifies the importance of achieving balance in the relationship between men and women. She extensively examines the concept of childbearing as presented in the holy Qur'an, particularly within the idea of *qiwamah*. *Qiwamah*, interpreted by some Muslims as granting superiority to men over women, is observed in the internalized struggles within Salwa. This internalization may lead her to feel constrained in expressing her desires and making decisions, including those related to childbearing, within her marriage. Amina Wadud's insights shed light on the complexities inherent in the concept of *qiwamah* and its potential impact on a woman's agency and ability to freely express her desires within the context of her relationship with her husband.

The child-bearing responsibility is of grave importance: human existence depends upon it. This responsibility requires a great deal of physical strength, stamina, intelligence, and deep personal commitment. Yet, while this responsibility is so obvious and important, what is the responsibility of the male in this family and society at large? For simple balance and justice in creation, and to avoid oppression, his responsibility must be equally significant to the continuation of the human race. The Qur'an establishes his responsibility as *qiwamah*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility that only she can fulfil.[...] Otherwise, 'it would be a serious oppression against the woman' (73).

The concept of childbearing is indeed rooted in the Qur'an; however, in Salwa's situation, it leads to a profound loss of her identity, rendering her helpless within the novel's narrative. She finds herself in a state of silence, unable to articulate her deep-seated desires. This silence is

exacerbated by the intensity of her need, described vividly as “so savage, so blinding, that for several months she had thought of nothing else and had not fought the evolutionary mandate to reproduce, just indulged it while she contoured her Lie.”(11). Salwa’s personal identity becomes submerged in the dominating will of her husband, whose decisions become unquestionable. Her silent suffering persists, and her internal conflict remains hidden from her husband, who is left pondering, “Had Salwa really wanted a child, or had this been an accident?” (Ibid, 110). In navigating the delicate balance between her identity and her husband's reluctance to have children, Salwa grapples with the unspoken complexities of her desires. She senses a need for her body to be free from the hormonal interference of birth control pills, yet she continues to endure in silence, as depicted in the narrative.

She had stopped for four days. Started for four. Jassim had made love to her twice in that time. But she wouldn't feel the effects so quickly, would she? The sun heaved itself up over the horizon as Salwa lay silent next to her husband, secretly allowing in the sliver of awareness that she absolutely could be pregnant (26).

Thus, the ongoing conflict within Salwa persists as she harbors thoughts of being pregnant, yet chooses to maintain silence. This internal struggle serves as a stark illustration of the loss of Salwa’s identity within the framework of marital patriarchy. Faced with the potential reality of pregnancy, Salwa contemplates the idea of returning home, recognizing the challenges she would encounter in raising a child in the U.S. This contemplation underscores the profound impact of the marital and societal dynamics on Salwa’s autonomy and her sense of self, as she grapples with the complex interplay between her personal desires and the expectations imposed by her cultural and marital context.

The official confirmation of Salwa’s pregnancy arrives “that she was pregnant came like a sentence, for now things would change” (60). The weight of this revelation is compounded by the realization that she cannot control the consequences of her pregnancy, particularly given Jassim’s unreadiness to have children. It takes Salwa an extended period of internal conflict before she finally discloses to Jassim that she was pregnant and subsequently miscarried. The timing of her revelation, occurring only after the loss of the child, highlights the depth of the marital patriarchy at play. The narrative confirms the loss of Salwa’s identity within this patriarchal structure, portraying her as an inferior character to her husband, whose decisions remain unquestionable. The delayed disclosure and the internal struggle to share such a significant aspect of her life point to the challenges Salwa faces in asserting her agency within the confines of marital dynamics shaped by patriarchal norms.

Having an Extra-Marital Relationship as an Illustration of the Loss Salwa’s Identity

Another aspect illustrating the loss of Salwa’s identity is her extramarital relationship with Jake. Following Salwa’s pregnancy and miscarriage, her relationship with her husband became strained, creating a noticeable distance between them. Salwa, as a Muslim Arab woman, hails from a deeply conservative culture where extramarital relationships are considered taboo for women. Despite this cultural norm, Salwa enters into an undefined relationship with Jake. While such situations might be viewed as commonplace in American culture, Salwa’s Arab identity adds a layer of complexity, as her cultural background does not traditionally accept such behaviors. This phase of Salwa’s life confirms the unraveling of her Arab female identity, shaped by her origins in Arabic culture.

The romantic relationship between Salwa and Jake starts with Jake's admiration for Salwa's beauty. Motivated by his attraction, Jake takes proactive steps to draw closer to Salwa, including enrolling in Arabic classes to facilitate communication. Through learning various Arabic phrases and gaining insight into Arabic Muslim culture, particularly inquiring about festivals like Eid, Jake strategically lays the groundwork to approach Salwa. The first scene that portrays Jake's commencement of an affair with Salwa unfolds as follows:

Her hand dropped to his chest, and he pushed his face lower and closer until his lips touched hers, gently at first, quiet like a butterfly's wings. He stopped, pulled his face away from hers, and held her close to him, folded her with his arms against his chest, his body (174-175).

The affair unfolded with Salwa expressing a desire to draw nearer to Jake and engage in a romantic relationship with him. In doing so, Salwa consciously distances herself from her own cultural roots, adopting aspects of American culture that contrast with her Muslim identity. As the affair progresses, Salwa not only continues her connection with Jake but deepens it. She ventures out with him, accepting invitations to his home, where the relationship evolves into a more intimate level—culminating in Salwa and Jake making love. Laila Halaby vividly captures this evolving relationship in a scene that unfolds as follows:

Salwa, [...], allowed him to unzip her skirt and place her clothes neatly on a chair next to the futons. To avoid wrinkles. Watched as he removed his own clothing in a heap, stood before her in underwear that reminded her of Jassim's bathing suit. He knelt on the floor and she allowed him between her legs while she sat on the edge of the futons, in her matching bra and panties, [...]. She allowed his hands to run along the edge of her waistband, his fingers to sneak beneath the elastic, to remove her bra, his mouth to kiss her breasts with gentle whisper kisses, to prepare them for what was to come (210).

The affair continues with Salwa seemingly deriving pleasure from the intimate moments shared with Jake. In doing so, she appears to crave these experiences, momentarily disregarding the fact that she is married to someone who holds the exclusive right to such intimacy. This further contributes to the loss of Salwa's identity as a Muslim Arabic woman, given that her cultural values prohibit such extramarital affairs. The scene of love-making repeats when Jake visits a house that Salwa is showcasing for potential buyers. Once again, Salwa willingly surrenders herself to Jake, who intentionally comes with the aim of engaging in a sexual encounter at that location, regardless of its safety or appropriateness. Jake ensures they are alone in the room, and the scene is vividly depicted as follows:

He moved to the edge of the bed and pulled her between his legs, placed her hands on his body, held her to him and unbuttoned her shirt. She let his fingers dance along her pink lacy bra, remove her left breast and suck on it, hard, unzip her skirt and let it fall to the floor in wrinkles, pull at her matching pink underwear, so she felt bound and ridiculous. [...] she did, let him lean back and pull her on top of him and didn't care what awaited her. Didn't care that his mouth tasted sour, that he wore no condom, didn't care what she opened herself to, just let it happen (261).

The depiction of Salwa losing her identity unfolds as she strays from the cultural values she was raised with. This transformation appears to be a consequence of the depression stemming from

her miscarriage and the growing emotional distance between her and her husband, Jassim. Salwa's actions, though seemingly unjustifiable, highlight the complexity of her emotional state. Despite initially succumbing to the allure of the affair, Salwa becomes restless and troubled, even in Jake's presence. This internal conflict prompts her to confide in Randa, her closest friend, admitting her unhappiness in the U.S. Salwa, feeling disconnected from her identity, seeks advice and is encouraged to return home, where she can find solace away from the conservative culture that shaped her upbringing.

The conclusion of the novel becomes profoundly heartbreaking when Salwa bids farewell to Jake, intending to sever their relationship. However, Jake misinterprets her visit, assuming it is for a sexual farewell. This starkly exposes the contrasting mentalities of the characters, revealing that Jake's interest in Salwa is primarily driven by a sexual motive, while Salwa grapples with conflicting desires—caught between the need for intimacy and the preservation of her cultural values. The culmination of their relationship takes a dark turn when Jake, in a moment of aggression, physically harms Salwa, inflicting injury upon her. This violent end serves as a symbolic reminder to both characters: for Jake, it confirms the shallow nature of his connection with Salwa, and for Salwa, it serves as a stark realization of the deviation from her cultural roots. The physical harm inflicted becomes a poignant symbol, marking Salwa's recognition of the profound loss of her identity in the course of her extramarital affair with Jake.

Conclusion

The immigrant experience often involves a gradual loss of identity due to the inherent challenges of grasping appropriate behaviour in unfamiliar conditions. The predicament confronting the Jordanian couple post-9/11 exacerbates this identity struggle. Salwa appears to be adrift, and her husband, affected by the chaotic aftermath of 9/11, undergoes a detachment from her. His turmoil begins with the complexities of his wife's pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage, extending to events such as Evan's accident and an encounter with another woman in a coffee shop, leading to a growing emotional closeness with her. These circumstances collectively contribute to the couple's sense of disconnection and the loss of their identities.

In summary, Salwa's loss of identity in the novel can be seen as a repercussion of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. Following these events, Arabs found themselves in a perplexing situation, unsure of where to anchor their identity. Despite their Arab heritage and culture, they grappled with the need to defend their cultural identity against the negative perceptions that arose after the attacks. Additionally, they experienced distress due to the impact on the country where they reside, namely America. As a result, the novel '*Once in a Promised Land*' portrays the theme of the loss of female identity in the context of these complex post-9/11 dynamics.

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