Amplification of Third Spaces after September 11th in Halaby’s Selected Works

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Abstract

American discourse has always been seeking a binary division to prove its own superiority. So after 9/11 by concocting Middle East and Arabs as the other side of the binary division and as the “Others”, it has tried to ignore the existence of a third group in which was “Third Spaces”. In Halaby’s works, “Third Spaces” – Homi Bhabha calls them Liminal People who are situated in a Third Space – are those Arab migrants to America who are not Arab nor American! What we see in Halaby’s works is that this action – what American discourse did – worked in an opposite direction and made these people more highlighted in the society. Nadine Naber believes that before 9/11 this group of people was some invisible characters in the society. But after 9/11 they got more highlighted and also got more attention of the world and what they (Third Spaces like Halaby herself) took advantage of, was that they made a clear image of these people for Americans and other people around the world. They even, to some extents, were successful to show that these Arabs are not so much different from them and in some aspects they are even better than Americans and act better and more morally. What Halaby shows us is that what American discourse was trying to do not only did not work but also worked in a paradoxical way and these people instead of being ignored became more amplified in the society and the falsity of the idea that all of these Arabs are some terrorists was proved.

Keywords : American Discourse, Liminal, September 11th, Postcolonial Studies, Third Space.
1. Introduction

This article deals with the situation of Third Space people after 9/11 in the US, in Halaby’s selected works. What it discusses based on these literary works is the fact that American discourse for proving the superiority of American identity, was trying to make a binary and put a group on the other side as the inferior. So 9/11 became an alibi for them to call Arabs the other side of the binary they were seeking. American discourse by the usage of Medias represented Arabs some terrorist, uncivilized people whose existence is a threat for the society. For doing this they had to ignore Third Space people who were neither Arabs nor Americans. But the considerable and interesting point was that what they tried to do had a paradoxical result and made these people more amplified and highlighted. Because after this event the world’s focus was more and more on this group of people, and they got more attention of people around the world ever. In this situation authors like Halaby and the other Arab-Americans took the chance to talk about their people, religion, language and culture and showed the world what they had been shown was just an exaggeration of the life of a limited number of Arabs. And Arab-Americans who live in their country are some people like them. So what American discourse tried to do turned to a failure, and in spite of what it tried to do, it made people know more clear about this community. This article in details discusses this process.

2. Discussion

2.1. Amplification of Third Spaces in Literature

2.1.1. Ignoring Third Spaces

Bhabha believes that when a group of people migrate to a new area with a complete different culture, what happens is that these people are not culturally the primary people anymore; they are some people who are in translation between the primary and secondary culture. In fact he believes that these people are in a liminal area which is named “Third Space” by him. Therefore the researcher has called the people of this area Third Space people or “Third Spaces”.

As mentioned before, after the fall of the Soviet Union, American identity suffered the great loss of identity. Because until that time for more than half a century, Americanness was defined in association with its Eastern counterpart. So Americans by assigning an “other” were trying to prove their own betterness. When the Soviet Union dissolved, they lost the relationship they were seeking all the time. There was no “other” and no binary, so they started to search and find another “other” as a replacement. So they concoct Middle East as the other side of the binary and 9/11 event made the binary complete and helped them to reach their purpose.

By use of Medias, they represented Arabs as a group of savage, uncivilized people, whose existence above all was threatening for American society. But doing this without ignoring Arab-Americans (Third Space people) was not possible. These Arabs were not their definition of Arabs (some terrorists) or Americans. These people were those ones who have come to this country and tried to become a part of it. These people were in none of the groups completely. They were not completely Arab, neither Americans. They were those ones who were in-between
those. Nothing about their culture, language, religion and identity was stable. They were transnational and translational ones who were between two nations and their cultures. But colonial discourse for making its binary needed stability and this unstable situation was not what it was looking for, so what colonial discourse did was simply ignoring that Third Space and the people in it to come back to its own stable binary. In its representation there was no sign of these people. Whatever was shown was Arabs who were terrorists. Being an Arab was defined as being a terrorist.

Halaby herself is an Arab-American who lives in America, so she is completely familiar with Muslims’ problems and she has seen what has happened to Muslims after 9/11. In her works, she has shown us life of Arab migrants who live in America and problems they had after 9/11. In her work “Once in a Promised Land” we see how these Third Space people after 9/11 are suffering because of the thought that American discourse has tried to put in Americans’ mind that all Arabs are dangerous terrorists and as a result we see one of the main characters loses his job because some people in his office are worried that an “Arab Doctor” has access to water supply of the city. Maybe they think that an Arab can commit a mass murder with poisoning the water and kill everybody. Some of his colleagues even call the FBI because they think that he acts strangely. And at the end Jassim loses his job. It shows how this event and the representations Media had after the collapse of twin towers, changed the mind of Americans toward Arabs and made Arabs some demon terrorists in their eyes. In another part we see some girls in a shopping center call security on him, because they have been told they should report any suspicious thing and an Arab man who is staring for some minutes to a motorcycle on a pedestal – it was a part of decoration of a store – can be suspicious!

Media represented a binary; Americans, and “others” – which here “other” means terrorist Arabs. These people (Third Space ones) although were not Americans, they were not terrorist Arabs. But colonial discourse forced them into this binary and categorized them as terrorists. We see the situation of Asians and specially Arabs in the US is really bad, and everybody treats them as some atomic bombs which can explode and kill everybody. And all of this has made in the mind of US citizens because of what has been represented in Medias before. They have made only one definition for Arabs, and it is terrorist. There is no word of the people who are in between these two groups, those ones who are Arabs and to some extent Americans.

2.1.2. Resistance (Result of Repression)

After 9/11, Arab-Americans had a miserable life in America that they did not deserve it. Ignorance of Third Space people made a great reaction. Those people tried to prove the falsity of the premise that all Arabs are some terrorists and for doing this they did a lot. Lots of Arab writers mostly in America started writing books, novels, and novellas – in English – about the life of Arab people – especially migrant ones – to show the reality of these people’s lives. The most important fact was that most of these writers were Arab-American themselves, and they knew about the problems of Arab-Americans – whom Halaby is one of them. Some of these novels which were written in English became famous and they had lots of readers in America and even around the world. It was not only novels – although novels were one of the most
effective ones – but also movies different essays, articles, and etc., made American people to think and know more and more about Arab people, and especially those Arab migrants. Halaby in her works gives lots of information about Islam and Muslims, Arabic language, and also Arab culture. She makes her readers more familiar about these subject matters. As Nadine Naber believes Arab community were some invisible people before 9/11 but this event made them somehow bold, although it was negative in the first place, but it also gave them a voice. And people read, talked, and discussed about them more. Halaby is one of those Third Space people who got really famous and her works were read widely after 9/11. She somehow tried to change the beliefs about Arab communities specially those migrant ones who live in America.

2.1.3. Amplification of Third Spaces

As mentioned before, after 9/11 Americans tried to highlight the binary that they were in one side and Arabs (who were presented as terrorists) were on the other side. But through doing this they ignored those Third Space people, those migrant ones who were living in America and were not the other side of binary. In their categorization there was no place for this group, so they just ignored existence of a group which was different from their definition of Arabs. They represented Arabs as a terrifying community that their existence can be dangerous for their society. But what they tried to do worked in a paradoxical way. Although in one hand they were successful, but in another hand they made that group more highlighted. This group after 9/11 became more amplified. They attracted more attention than before and people learned more about them. More books were written and read about these people and the things related to them like their language and culture. And the most controversial issue, their religion (Islam) became known for the people. And even in many ways it got proven that these people are the superior group on some issues.

2.2. Amplification of Third Spaces in Halaby’s works

2.2.1. Islam and Muslims

Halaby in her works talks about Arab Muslims who live in America or even sometimes those ones who live back in Jordan. Through the novels we get more and more familiar with Muslims, their different ceremonies and also their beliefs. She somehow shows the readers, Islam and Muslims are not what the rest of the world thinks of them. They are different from Christianity and Christians but what is important, is that some people go to extreme in religion, and Muslims are not exceptions. And it can happen in any other religion. So if some of them are extremist, we cannot say that all of them are. The problem with those people – non-Muslims – is that they do not know Muslims or Islam; they know only a little about Muslims and their religion. Halaby in some parts talks about Quran and what it says, and also makes the reader more familiar with different Muslims and how they are consist of good and bad. She takes advantage of the story telling and talks in different parts about Quran, Prophet Muhammad, mosques, praying, Ramadan, and Muslims’ different ceremonies. As said before, this event (9/11) made the works of these people more highlighted and gave them a voice, so it had a paradoxical result and made people of the world know more about Muslims and Islam.
The reader after reading this about life of these innocent Arabs who lose their job, and their life changes after 9/11, starts thinking more about them. Halaby makes the reader to think deeper about Muslims and gives more information about them for knowing them better.

2.2.2. Muslims’ Multiple Marriages

Muslim’s – and especially Arabs’ – multiple marriages is one of the things, which is ridiculed by non-Muslims all the time. In West of the Jordan, we read that a widow has to get married and cannot live alone. Their parents force them to get married sometimes even for the fourth time, although the widows are not young anymore. And we also see sometimes men wed to girls who are in the age of their daughters or some men aspire and desire virgin girls for getting married to, despite the fact that they are old or they have been with some women before.

There is no comparison in novels or anything which shows which one (an Arab man or an American one) is better or worse, but we see that although Americans do not do the same thing but they do something similar in another way which seems neater but what they do is as nasty as what Muslims do. For instance, in this novel or other ones we see unrestrained American men who do not know any limitation for their sexual relationships but they know themselves family men. In Hair, Prayer, and Men, when the protagonist, Jubayna, traveling by the plane, the man who is sitting next to her and announces himself as a man who is in love with his wife and family, flirts with her, and even touches her thigh and says her when he was asleep during the flight, he had a dream about her. In West of the Jordan, an American man who has a wife and family sleeps with an Arab beauty. In Once in a Promised Land, we see an American boy seduces a married woman to sleep with him. So we have a clarification about the fact that it is not something that only Arab men do. American men also do it, only in another way. So there is no superiority of American men over Arab ones.

2.2.3. Arabic Language

Another thing that Halaby shows the reader and makes him to know about it more is Arabic language. She even uses Arabic alphabet in the first page of her book, West of the Jordan, for dedicating it to two Arab people, although the book is for English language readers. But this is not the whole story. Her characters use Arabic phrases and words in different situations. Halaby adroitly brings Arabic phrases in some parts of the text that the meaning of the phrase becomes obvious and after some repetition, reader cannot forget it. So it is not only the use of those words but also by repeating them, makes them familiar in reader’s eye and somehow teaches him/her about this language. She has shown us those Arabic words in italic. Some of them in West of the Jordan are Inshallah (means God’s willing), As-salaamu alaykom (for saying hello), Alaykum as-slaam (for answering hello), habibti (means darling), baba (means dad), yulla (means come on, or go on). And in Hair, Prayer, and Men, we can refer to bismallah ar-rahman ar-raheem (means in the name of God, the benevolent, the merciful), and alhamdilillah (means thanks God). It is obvious that these are not the only Arabic words she has used in her works but they are those ones which has been repeated so many times during her works. In the other novel, Once in a Promised Land, one of her characters, Jake, is interested in Arabic and wants to learn
it. So we have some parts of the conversations in Arabic between Salwa and him. While Salwa talks to him and tries to teach him Arabic, and in some cases giving informations about Arab people’s culture, somehow she is indirectly makes the reader to learn about it, too. So not only in some cases we have some Arabic words and phrases in the conversations between Arab characters, but one of the main characters gives information and in some points teaches Arabic to the other character. For example she talks about pronunciations and structures in Arabic. By doing all these things she makes the reader familiar with this language, its rules, pronunciations and etc.

2.2.4. Arab Culture
2.2.4.1. Once in a Promised Land

When Jasim leaves the restaurant, in his way out passes two men who are staring at him. He is deep in his thoughts and automatically says “Good morning” to them, forgets for a moment where he is living and they do not respond (180). For a second he forgets that America is a place that you cannot say hello like this to a stranger. He forgets here is not home that you can say hi to everybody in the street. By reading these lines and an Arab’s feeling in America, we can understand the intimacy and kindness which exist among Arab people and lack of it among Americans.

One of the bothering issues about Arab people is that they intrude in the other people’s life so much. Although in many cases they are just trying to help, it is annoying when they ask different questions about personal issues, or give their opinions, and worse than all even let themselves to judge you about what you have done. As Halaby’s character thinks, American people do not have that bothering culture and they let you do whatever you like and they just observe the consequences and you are on your own and responsible for what happens next as a result. But at least nobody interferes in your personal life issues (181).

That’s true that people in America do not intrude in somebody’s personal life. They do not judge you and you can do whatever it seems to be true in your mind. But the reality is that this is just an ideal image which is not true! It is only an illusion that you are free and nobody interferes in your life! We observe FBI agents go through Jasim’s personal life because they think that he can be a threat for their country, although they have no proof or evidence for their claim. Or we see Jack Franks, a man who comes to the same club as Jasim, has no boundaries for asking questions about his wife. When it is the first time they have met each other, and only after some minutes he starts asking personal questions about his personal life and even his wife and if she is attractive or not! (7)

An interesting point about one of the main characters (Salwa) is that when she is talking to her friend about her betrayal to her husband, she cannot say or even think about it in Arabic. Betrayal in their culture is something, which even thinking or talking about it sounds bad (284). She cannot even say this in her mother tongue. In their culture and religion an event like this is one of the original sins which is unforgivable, that a married Arab woman is afraid of even saying it in her language. But this is not a rare case in American culture so saying it in English...
seems easier. Even when she says I have become friend with a man, Randa switches her language and says friends is okay and again switches back to Arabic and continues to say something else. It shows even becoming friend with a man for a married woman is not a good thing in their culture. It somehow shows their royalty to their marriages, which is something not that much important in American culture.

Even after only kissing Jake in the parking lot, she thinks that it is something which belongs to American culture so it is an American problem and as a result she decides whenever wants to think about what she has done, think about it only in English (175).

There is a conversation between Salwa and her colleague, Petra, in the parking lot that makes Salwa to think about American culture more. Petra tells her that her girlfriend has left her for a man. Salwa tries to be nice to her but it seems weird in her eyes; she really wants to walk away. She thinks “how odd to feel such sympathy and disgust all in one moment. Salwa burned to walk away, not just from this conversation but from this culture, where men and women could choose between men and women, where there were no limits, no taboos.” This “not having a limitation at all in relationships” bothers her badly. In her home (Jordan) they do not have such a thing. But here nothing is a taboo! People can do whatever which please them, although it is having sex with the same sex, it is betrayal, or even seducing married women.

Even in their speaking, they (Americans) feel no shame to talk about things related to sexual matters. For example about having a baby, they simply mention it in front of the other people that they are trying. Jassim “hated that expression, hated how Americans felt no shame in announcing that they were “trying to get pregnant,” as though saying it did not imply two adults stripped naked and connected.” What we see is that there is no taboo for those people even in their speaking about personal life issues. Again Halaby does not say which one is good and which one is not. Just tells us, it is something unbearable for Arabs.

After miscarriage Salwa thinks with herself that “if Jassim was not ready to have a family, a whole entire complete family, maybe she would turn this into an American story and leave.” Again this is an American story that a wife leaves her husband like this. Arabs are more royal in this kind of issues and usually do not do that but it is completely common thing for Americans to do such a thing. Only by saying “turning this to an American story” she depicts Arabs as loyal people who do not leave their partners like this and try to find a solution instead.

Another criticism to American life is that, job plays an important and integral role in your life. No matter what, you should work hard. After kissing Jake, Salwa has lost her concentration at work so she tries to focus and “put her entire being into her work”. She thinks “That was the American way, after all, wasn’t it? Let your soul get sucked out but work hard in the meantime”. Salwa is living in America, so she tries to act like Americans. Although it is not what she has seen back at home – having a simpler but happier life. When Salwa’s father is talking to Jassim about his youth, he says that long ago when he and his wife were younger and aspirant to live in America, they left Jordan and went to the US. But they could not tolerate living and working so hard like Americans so they left there and came back home to have a simpler but happier life in Jordan. So it comes to reader’s mind that maybe Arabs do not have a modern life as Americans
and their lives are simpler and less luxurious, but at the same time it is less materialistic, and also happiness and love is more over there.

Another false idea about Arabs is that, Americans do not even know where they (Arabs) are exactly from. We observe when Penny is talking to her roommate about Osama, and her desire for him to be killed and bombed by the US government, her roommate says that you like an Arab man and you desire the government to bomb his whole country to kill Osama?! She does not know that Osama is not an Arab, he is just Muslim like Arabs and he belongs to Afghanistan not Jordan!

2.2.4.2. West of the Jordan

Halaby mentions some common ideas about Arabs and how stupid they seem when the readers read about their lives and see it is not a bit like that! These false ideas are for example how primitively those people live and they have nothing except oil wills, how men can have too many wives, and etc.

In one of the parts that Soraya is narrator, we read about what her classmates think of Arabs. She is passing by, that she hears they are talking about her. “She’s Arabian,” “In her country they don’t have furniture or dishwasher, only oil.” So she messes around with them and tells them the things they are interested to hear, “which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to an old Shaykh So-and So and the five oil wells … (her) father owns.” As we read the story and lives of these people we see none of these things and know that these kind of things are not the reality of Arab lives.

One of the comparisons that occurs in reader’s mind is that how Arabs are accused for being nasty (this point was discussed under the title “Muslims’ Multiple Marriages”), immoral, and uncivilized, which as we read we understand that is not true, but when you look at the Americans you can see they do so many immoral things without any shame or feeling guilty.

As an example, we can refer to the Social Studies teacher in Khadija’s school. He calls her DJ and makes fun of her name in front of the other students. And maybe he is one of the reasons that Khadija is really hurt about her name and likes to change it to some American name with a simpler pronunciation for those people.

Talking about Arab culture and how kind those people are toward each other, we can refer to Khadija’s birthday that her aunt (Maysoun) invites people and makes dinner and does everything for celebration because she knows that if she does not do that, her parents will not. Or when Khadija’s mother understands that she has had a new friend for three weeks and have not invited her for dinner yet, gets mad. Here and there, we see different examples to show their kindness toward each other.

We also see how much Arabs are caring about their families. Women pay attention to their children and what they do and what they eat. In the case of Khadija and her friend, Patsy gets surprised when she sees Khadija’s mother has made French Fries at home. When Khadija goes to her house she understands the reason of surprise! (150)
Another cultural issue is about taking care of grandparents and respecting them; they are really important and respected members in most of Arab families. For example Sitti – the oldest member of this family who lives in Nawara – is living with one of her daughters and granddaughter and they take care of her and is respected a lot. Or Khadija’s paternal grandfather lives with them in the US. But we see when they go to America little by little they start to forget about their parents. For example Hamdi “is too busy with his American life, with his American wife, to come to say goodbye (to his mother). Or even hello.” In spite of the fact that Hamdi’s mother is dying, he is so busy with his American life that he does not even come to say goodbye to his mother for the last time. Or in the case of Khadija’s grandfather we see after living for some years in America he loses respect of his children toward himself and his son insults or even beats him once. These are the things that can never happen back at home. At home, everybody like and respect old ones. They never let them be annoyed by anything but this is not part of Americans’ culture, and these people (these migrated and Third Space ones) just by living among Americans start to be like them and forget about their parents. Khadija says that “Once I heard my mother tell Monia that she thought Baba might be crazy because of all the things he did, but especially because he didn’t respect his father properly (192)”. And when Shahira (Khadija’s mother) talks to her family about the problems of living in the US, says “My husband is very difficult at times and does not respect people, not even his own father. Oof, you should hear the way he talks to him, just like an American. I mean no respect at all (184)”. She believes that her husband has become like Americans, because Arabs never do such a thing to their parents, except crazy ones. So she sometimes thinks of him as a crazy person or sometimes a person who is not an Arab anymore.

How they name their children is another interesting point. Patsy has a little brother named Micky. They have named him after the singer, Mick Jagger. When Khadija says this to her mom, she gets shocked. Because in their culture people mostly name their children after heroes, good people, and prophets not some famous singers or actors (150, 151). It shows how Arabs rightfully do the thing which is better and it is a part of their culture, but Americans just do what they feel right at the moment. Halaby uses English language to make Americans familiar with Arab culture, religion, language, ideas, and also showing false ideas about Arabs and at the same time makes readers believe the superiority of Arabs in some cases.

As it was said before giving information about Arabs and making the other people to know them better, is one of the things Halaby does in researcher’s mind. She tells us about their religion, language, culture, customs, and even their different ceremonies like their traditional weddings, their henna day, their funerals, their traditional dance dabka, and other things. And it is not just giving information, reading about all these things about Arab people and putting them together with what Americans do, makes us to believe that, these people in many cases are better than Americans.
3. Conclusion

As mentioned Third Space people (Arab migrants in America) after the collapse of twin towers, had a really catastrophic situation. Medias showed Arab people as dangerous ones and made people scared of them. This action created a greater resistance from this group of people (Third Space people who were living in America like Halaby and other Arab-American authors); they tried to show the falsity of the premise that all Arabs are some terrorists and they were successful to some extents. They used the chance that the whole world was focusing on them and made a better picture of Arab society in their minds. They even made them to believe that not only Arabs are not terrorist, but in some aspects they are better and superior than Americans. And what American discourse wanted to do is working in a paradoxical way; to some extents they (Arabs) were ignored and hurt, but on the other hand they got highlighted in the society and the world paid more attention to them. The works of different Arab-American authors like Halaby made the world and American people know Arab people and specially these Third Space ones (Arab-Americans) more. And even a hypothesis formed in their mind that Arab people, their culture, their language, and even their religion is better and superior than theirs in some respects. This article discusses situation of Third Space people after 9/11 in American society based on what Halaby has pictured, and it also shows how after this event these people in a paradoxical way got amplified and found a louder voice.

Its argument is according to what this author has depicted and it is the fact that American discourse always for showing its own superiority was searching for an “other” to make a binary and put this “other” on the other side of it and shows its own betterness. 9/11 event helped American discourse to reach its goal and assign Arabs as the “other” which was seeking for. So by the usage of Medias they represented Arabs as what they wanted to; some terrorist, uncivilized people who are potential danger for their society. But for doing this, they ignored the existence of a third group which were not completely Arab or American. Therefore this third group was categorized as terrorists in American society which it made their lives really difficult in America. But researcher believes that what American discourse tried to do worked in a paradoxical way; although they were successful to some extents and made a miserable life for this Third Space people as we see in Arab-American’s literary works, but paradoxically they made the world concentrate more on Arabs and especially those Third Space ones. After the event more Arab-American writers wrote books, novels, articles, etc. about their situation in America and they also explained more about their people, language, religion, and culture. So they were read, discussed, and thought more in which in some cases even leaded to this matter that not only Arabs are not those uncivilized and terrorist people they described, but in some cases they are even better and superior.
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