

Politicizing the Workspace in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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Abstract

This study investigates the politicization of workspaces in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land*, with an emphasis on the post-9/11 American context. By closely analyzing the protagonists' experiences in their professional settings, the study argues that an inflated sense of patriotism infiltrates the workplaces in the novel. This significantly influences the career paths of employees, especially those of Arab descent. Utilizing Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space, this article examines how the firm and the bank become arenas for surveillance, censorship, and discrimination. These dynamics reflect broader societal tensions. The article reveals how Halaby's narrative challenges the idea of the American Dream by highlighting the intricate interactions between personal expression, societal structures, and professional experiences within a politically charged context. By examining the spatial and social dynamics of these workspaces, this study sheds light on how global events and national sentiments reshape fundamental aspects of daily life, especially for marginalized groups. Moreover, the article contends that Halaby's work provides a subtle critique of the extensive effects of unchecked patriotism and systemic discrimination in professional settings. It calls for a reevaluation of the concepts of belonging and professionalism in modern America.

Keywords: Politicization, Patriotism, Arab Descent, Social Space, American Dream, Systemic Discrimination.

1. Introduction

Following the events of 9/11, the American workplace underwent significant changes. It evolved into a space where political tensions and cultural discussions intensified. Halaby's (2007) novel *Once in a Promised Land* thoroughly explores this shift, shedding light on the intricate connections between work life, political discourse, and cultural identity during the early 21st century in America. The study investigates how Halaby's narrative exposes the subtle politicization of workplaces, particularly affecting Arab-Americans, in an era characterized by heightened patriotism and suspicion.

Central to this analysis is Lefebvre's (1991) concept of space as a social construct. Lefebvre argues that "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics. It has always been political and strategic. There is an ideology of space. Because space, which seems homogeneous,

which appears as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product” (p. 73). This viewpoint rejects the idea of space as a neutral, unbiased construction and instead characterizes it as a fluid outcome of social and political influences. Such a conceptual framework is essential for analyzing the workplace dynamics depicted in Halaby's novel, where professional settings become charged domains of political and social conflict.

In this paper, I argue that these socially constructed professional domains have become overly patriotic, as evidenced by the novel, and have changed the employment patterns and working lives of people. This politicization, which is evident in enhanced surveillance and implicit censorship, highlights the complex interplay between the self, culture, and the changing dynamics of the American workplace. Thus, by exploring the experiences of the characters such as Jassim and Salwa in particular professional contexts of the firm and the bank, respectively, this article seeks to reveal the profound effects of political dynamics on these spheres and the resulting effects on individual and collective subjectivities.

Utilizing Lefebvre's (1991) theories of social space alongside post-9/11 American studies, this article aims to deconstruct the multiple layers of politicization within the workplace. This analysis elucidates how global processes and national sentiments can redefine fundamental aspects of existence, including identity, work, and the American Dream. By examining the workplace as a socially constructed space, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of the interplay between political discourses, social relations, and subjectivities in the post-9/11 context.

1.1 The Firm and the Bank as Political Spaces in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

Laila Halaby is a talented writer of Arab origin who has contributed significantly to the development of literature. In her books like *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land* (Halaby, 2007), she explores issues of identity, family, and love against the backdrop of the Middle East. Born in Lebanon and raised in the United States, Halaby's work inspires the audience to consider the intersections of cultures and personal journeys. Besides writing, she works as an Outreach Counselor, which also involves the use of narrative therapy to highlight the importance of stories in people's lives and their ability to help people understand themselves and the world around them (Halaby, 2023).

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby (2007) skillfully brings to life the story of Jassim and Salwa, a middle-class Jordanian couple living in Tucson, Arizona. Initially, the novel centers on their immigration journey and desire to assimilate into American society. However, after 9/11, this aspiration is sharply disrupted, shifting the narrative as the couple faces new forms of prejudice. Halaby does not shy away from exploring the complexities of Jassim and Salwa's relationship, revealing how cultural barriers strain their love and sense of belonging. As the story takes a political turn, particularly in the workplace, Halaby illustrates the harsh impact of post-9/11 sentiments on their lives, ultimately depicting how they move from initial assimilation toward a more nuanced, hybrid identity in response to these challenges.

The dynamics of Arab American experiences, as illustrated historically and contemporarily, are echoed in literature such as *Once in a Promised Land* (Halaby, 2007). In the novel, Salwa is employed as a bank teller in Tucson. Her professional life at the bank is intricately linked with her personal life, marked by a strained relationship with Jassim and an affair with Jake, a colleague. The interplay between her work environment and personal life pressures shapes Salwa's internal conflict and influences her decisions throughout the narrative. Conversely, Jassim is a hydrologist at a well-known engineering firm in Tucson. His dedication to guaranteeing

universal access to water is a key focus of his efforts within the company. However, his career takes a drastic shift when he becomes the subject of an FBI investigation due to suspicions of his being engaged in domestic terrorism. Jassim's professional journey at the engineering firm sheds light on the personal and professional obstacles he encounters as the plot progresses.

1.2 Review of Related Literature

Analyzing the critical reception of Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, several scholars provide valuable interpretations that help to understand the complex motifs of the novel. Djohar (2019) discusses the effects of governmental surveillance and how it has become a part of people's lives, strengthening prejudice against Muslims in the United States (p. 119). This portrayal highlights issues of race, religion, and politics, especially through the lens of the FBI's actions post-9/11 (Djohar, 2019).

Zeghoudi (2022) builds on Halaby's analysis of how Americans viewed Arabs before and after 9/11 (p. 147), showing how the novel portrays suspicion and misunderstanding through characters such as Jassim and Bella (Zeghoudi, 2022).

Ismael (2023) examines the portrayal of Arab American communities in the post-9/11 era and their search for identity in contexts marked by terrorism and diaspora (p. 191).

Bhat (2014) offers a psychological reading of characters such as Jassim and discusses themes of complacency and identity crisis within the framework of social change (p. 109).

Katharina Motyl (2011) analyzes Marcus, Jassim's boss, as a critique of liberal capitalism and its effects on minorities, adding a political and economic dimension to the narrative (p. 232).

Despite these critical analyses, gaps remain regarding specific aspects of Halaby's narrative. Further exploration could focus on the nuanced responses of characters like Salwa to workplace dynamics, marginalization, and discrimination, as indicated in Bhat's observations (Bhat, 2014).

Additionally, the analysis of identity, power relations, and societal vulnerability provided by Chandio (2020) in relation to Salwa's experience of discrimination opens further lines of inquiry (p. 45).

Moreover, a Foucauldian approach to power and subjectivity proposed by Alnwairan, Abuoaf & Almenia (2022) suggests that the dynamics of Salwa's relationship with her boss Joan warrant deeper investigation (p. 54).

Such directions for further research highlight the multifaceted nature of Halaby's story and its significance in ongoing literary discussions.

2. Discussion and Analysis

2.1. The Firm as a Political Space

Since the aftermath of 9/11, there has been a rise in patriotism among Americans, which has resulted in heightened security measures. This has enabled the FBI to increase its ability to monitor immigrants, including at their places of work regardless of their class status. This level of patriotism has led to the politicization of workplaces and has affected the career progression of employees (Malos, 2009). Gandara (2006) has pointed out that employers who have been sued for employment discrimination arising from post-9/11 backlash based on race and national origin may be liable under both Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 42 U. S. C. §1981. As such, they

could be held legally responsible for damages twice for the same alleged discrimination (Gandara, 2006). For example, Jassim's career has been severely affected, especially due to the effects of 9/11. This decline is further compounded after a fatal accident that involves the death of a child, which leads to him being suspected of being a terrorist with the aim of attacking the city's water supply. In response, Jassim justifies:

Jassim couldn't help himself. "Means is one thing, motive is another. I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. [...] Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. It is sometimes best to look within before casting such a broad net" (Halaby, 2007).

In this narrative, Jassim, who identifies as a scientist and normal Arab citizen confronts the social class and politics of Arab Americans. While stressing the fact that he is solely responsible for water safety and supply, he challenges the prejudice associated with his Arab appearance and alleged misconduct. Jassim also emphasizes the need for self-reflection before one jump to conclusions about a person's ethnicity or religion. Halaby also highlights the effects of prejudice on the professional status of the person and the general consequences for the relations between social classes and political attitudes. Lefebvre (1991) asserts that "the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space" (p. 38). In terms of Lefebvre's "spatial practice," Jassim's damaged career is indicative of shifts in the actual practice of space use and organization as a result of 9/11. Spatial practices in the workplace change, and this affects Jassim in terms of role and career prospects. Furthermore, the labelling of Jassim as a potential terrorist is a significant contribution to the social space by creating hierarchies, power dynamics, and social relations based on suspicion and fear.

Moreover, Halaby (2007) portrays the American workspace, often seen as a land of promise, as a treacherous trap that does not offer a welcoming environment for Arab immigrants like Jassim, a hydrologist. Despite Jassim's clear allegiance to America and his condemnation of the September 11 attacks, his boss, Marcus, issues a warning saying: "The FBI came to our offices today. They asked about you, about what you do here, about your behavior. They asked me if you talk about your religion or any political issues. [...] They asked me what your reaction was to September 11" (p. 224). To clarify, the previous quotation reflects the politicization of the workspace, as the FBI's inquiry into Jassim's activities at his workplace reveals the intrusion of political concerns into the professional sphere. The scrutiny over Jassim's discussions related to religion, politics, and his reaction to 9/11 (all of which are ironically protected by the First Amendment) underscores how personal and political aspects intersect within the workplace, affecting individuals like Jassim.

In another context, Halaby (2007) reveals a climate of suspicion and prejudice within the workplace, where Jassim, seemingly due to his Arab identity, becomes the target of unwarranted scrutiny and accusations. The involvement of the FBI adds a serious and potentially damaging dimension to Jassim's professional and personal life. The narrative suggests the pervasive impact of post-9/11 sentiments, leading to unjust scrutiny and actions based on unfounded biases. For instance, Marcus, Jassim's boss, becomes aware of the FBI inquiry and the woman overseeing the investigation. Marcus informs his wife that "Bella's [Jassim's colleague] been keeping a notebook on Jassim [...] Because he's an Arab. I found that out after the FBI left" (p. 235). Marcus found the FBI inquiry unexpected, triggered by statements made by someone. However, "Bella's been keeping tabs on Jassim, called the FBI on him at least twice" (p. 236). Actually, the FBI's inquiry

influences the “lived space,” which is the direct experience and perception of space. Jassim's lived space is affected by the intrusion of political concerns, shaping how he experiences and navigates the professional sphere within the company.

Furthermore, *once in a Promised Land* serves as a postcolonial and diasporic exploration, which attempts to reflect the impact of the post-9/11 political rhetoric on the lives of the Arab American diaspora, such as Jassim. It stresses that their identity and existence are defined and limited by discourses of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The narrative focuses on Jassim's interactions in his workplace, and how these large-scale political narratives affect individuals on a personal and professional level. On the other hand, I assert that *Once in a Promised Land* thoroughly investigates the intersections of gender, class, and various socio-political issues within the post-9/11 epoch. The novel is successful in raising awareness and inviting the readers to think about the role and status of Arabs in ethnic and racial discourses, especially through Jassim and Salwa.

In this sense, Lefebvre (1991) suggests that “examining space may help us solve the methodological and theoretical problem embodied in the question, ‘What changed in this crucial period?’ Transition implies mediation” (p. 268). By “examining space,” Lefebvre refers to the idea that physical and social settings—such as Jassim's workplace—are not simply locations but are embedded with cultural, political, and ideological layers that mirror broader societal changes. Lefebvre's insight about examining space as a means to understand pivotal periods like 9/11 resonates deeply with the topic at hand. In the novel, such spaces become sites where post-9/11 narratives of terrorism and racialized identity impose boundaries on Arab Americans, affecting both personal and professional lives. Applying Lefebvre's perspective, one can explore how the spatial landscape post-9/11, including workplaces and public spaces, mirrors and mediates the cultural and political shifts of the time. This approach enriches the understanding of how these changes impact collective consciousness and identity, as seen in the lived experiences of Jassim and other characters in the novel.

In depicting Jassim's experience, the novel unveils the political repercussions of 9/11 on him, a hydrologist who, despite his innocence, falls under FBI suspicion. The post-9/11 environment transforms his workplace into a politically charged setting where trust erodes, and colleagues take on the role of censors, reporting on him. This politicization extends beyond the workplace, seeping into his home life and relationships. Moreover, Marcus dismisses him based on these suspicions, forcing Jassim to confront the harsh truth about the American Dream illusion he had been cherishing: “It made him shaky and unsettled. Unbalanced.... An axis unable to rebalance. An axis of evil.... *I understand American society*, he [Jassim] wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here.* How could this be happening?” (Halaby, 2007).

Despite doing a job to help people and being very professional, Jassim feels like he has always been an outsider. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the concept of “the Other” arises when dominant cultures cast certain groups as inferior or threatening, reinforcing boundaries of exclusion and control (Said, 1978). Jassim realizes that his life in America so far has been like a nightmare: he is not seen as an American but as a replaceable Arab living in America, subject to the same stereotypes and suspicions that categorize him as “the Other.”

That is to say, according to Lefebvre (1991), “Political space is not established solely by actions (with material violence generating a place, a legal order, a legislation): the genesis of a

space of this kind also presupposes a practice, images, symbols, and the construction of buildings, of towns, and of localized social relationships” (p. 245). Lefebvre’s quotation underlines that the political construction of space is not a mere matter of actions and laws but includes the everyday practices, symbols, and material environment. When applied in relation to Jassim’s narrative, it reveals how the post-9/11 political climate transforms his workplace into a charged environment of suspicion and surveillance, affecting both his professional and personal life. This transformation illustrates how political spaces are created and maintained through a combination of legal, social, and symbolic actions, profoundly impacting individual experiences in the aftermath of significant events like 9/11.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space, as introduced in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994), provides a critical framework for understanding how individuals navigate hybrid identities in culturally complex environments. The Third Space is not merely a geographical or physical space but a discursive and cultural site where identity is constantly negotiated and reinterpreted. Bhabha argues that the Third Space is born from the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition and the subject of enunciation (Bhabha, 1994). This gap represents a place of discursive embeddedness, where meaning is produced not simply through direct communication between individuals but through their cultural positions and the dynamic interplay between them. For Bhabha, the creation of meaning and identity requires passing through this Third Space, which complicates and destabilizes fixed notions of identity and culture.

Jassim’s experience as an Arab American in post-9/11 America illustrates this process of navigating a hybrid identity within the Third Space. Jassim, who believes his professional success and economic status as a hydrologist can shield him from suspicion, finds himself entangled in a cultural and social terrain that forces him to constantly renegotiate his identity. Bhabha’s assertion that the Third Space represents an ambivalent process that disrupts any homogeneous, unifying idea of culture (Bhabha, 1994) speaks directly to Jassim’s struggle. He occupies a liminal space where he is both integrated into the economic fabric of American society and, at the same time, viewed with suspicion due to his ethnic and cultural background.

Bhabha also challenges the notion of cultural purity or fixity, arguing that all cultural systems are constructed in an ambivalent space of enunciation, where identity is fluid, “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (Bhabha, 1994). Jassim’s identity as a successful professional and as an Arab American is constantly reinterpreted within this Third Space. His economic and social achievements are insufficient to protect him from racial profiling, demonstrating the precariousness of his position in the U.S. His experience mirrors Bhabha’s description of how identities in the Third Space are subject to “contradiction and ambivalence,” and how they must be continuously redefined to adapt to changing contexts.

Furthermore, Bhabha highlights how the Third Space allows for the assimilation of contraries and creates “occult instability” that can lead to profound cultural changes (Bhabha, 1994). This instability is evident in Jassim’s life, as his outward stability—marked by his professional status—is constantly undermined by the pervasive scrutiny of the FBI and his colleagues. Jassim’s efforts to create his own Third Space involve navigating these tensions and maintaining a sense of self that balances his desire for social and economic integration with the reality of being perceived as a perpetual outsider.

In this hybrid space, Jassim's identity is neither fixed as a successful professional nor reduced to the stereotype of an Arab American under suspicion. Instead, he exists in an "in-between space" (Bhabha, 1994), where his cultural identity is negotiated and redefined at the intersection of multiple pressures. This aligns with Bhabha's argument that the Third Space opens the possibility of "conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (Bhabha, 1994). Jassim's navigation of this hybrid identity reflects how he manages to construct a Third Space that resists simple binaries of "us" versus "them," as he attempts to elude the "politics of polarity" (Bhabha, 1994) in his day-to-day life.

Ultimately, Jassim's creation and management of his own Third Space in *Once in a Promised Land* can be seen through the lens of Bhabha's theory, where identity is fluid, hybrid, and constantly negotiated within a space of cultural ambivalence. His economic and social standing are part of this process, but they do not offer him complete protection from the scrutiny and prejudice he faces. Instead, Jassim's identity is continuously reshaped within this Third Space, reflecting the broader dynamics of cultural hybridity and negotiation that Bhabha describes.

Halaby (2007) aims to portray Jassim as a character deeply affected by the events of 9/11, much like other immigrants, suggesting that he is not exempt from effects of 9/11 despite his high social status. However, he appears to have neglected handling these events wisely, especially when compared to his wife, Salwa. Therefore, initially, Jassim attempts to deceive himself by disregarding the harassment he faces at work and in public spaces. Besides, Jassim's position in the upper middle class, achieved through his white-collar job and strong belief in the American dream, leads him to overlook the potential lethal ramifications of 9/11. Furthermore, subject to suspicion by the FBI and facing potential job termination due to client complaints about his Arabic background, which clients associate with terrorism, Jassim comes to the realization that his thoughts are misguided:

In more than a decade of good citizenship, he [Jassim] had never for a minute imagined that his successes would be crossed out by a government censor's permanent marker, that his mission would be absorbed by his nationality, or that Homeland Security would have anything to do with him. Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. (Halaby, 2007)

The passage portrays Jassim's shock and disillusionment when his years of good citizenship are overshadowed by discrimination from government agencies like Homeland Security solely based on his nationality. It illustrates his disbelief that such discrimination could occur in America, highlighting the betrayal of his ideals and the erasure of his achievements by biased perceptions. Actually, this aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) perspective:

Today the state and its bureaucratic and political apparatuses intervene continually in space and make use of space in its instrumental aspect in order to intervene at all levels and through every agency of the economic realm. Consequently, (global) social practice and political practice tend to join forces in spatial practice, so achieving a certain cohesiveness if not a logical coherence. (p. 378)

Lefebvre emphasizes state intervention in spatial realms, intertwining social and political dynamics. Applied to Jassim's character, it reflects immigrant experiences post-9/11. Despite his privilege, he faces suspicion and job loss due to racial profiling, highlighting societal complexities. His story showcases how spatial dynamics, social hierarchies, and political interventions shape immigrant identity and belonging in a post-9/11 context.

This dynamic can be further understood through the concept of the state of exception, which refers to a legal space where normal laws are suspended. As Agamben (2005) states, “The state of exception is not a dictatorship [...] but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations [...] are deactivated. Thus, all those theories that seek to annex the state of exception immediately to the law are false” (p. 50). In Jassim's case, the state of exception manifests itself as institutionalized discrimination based on his national origin, reflecting broader societal issues exacerbated by post-9/11 security measures.

Moreover, this quotation from Lefebvre underscores how state interventions in spatial realms not only regulate physical spaces but also influence social practices and political actions. In Jassim's case, these interventions manifest as institutionalized discrimination based on national origin, reflecting broader societal issues exacerbated by post-9/11 security measures.

Furthermore, Kaplan (2003) in “Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space” explores how language and spatial representations shape perceptions of homeland security and American identity, especially in response to threats like terrorism. Kaplan analyzes the cultural and political implications of these constructs on public opinion and policy-making in the United States. Similarly, Lauren Berlant (1997) examines U.S. citizenship as a complex interplay between legal status and emotional identification with the nation, influenced by historical exclusions and socio-political dynamics. Berlant reflects on how citizenship shapes and is shaped by various forms of social and political life (pp. 37-41).

Finally, after the FBI begins to harass his boss, Marcus, at work due to Jassim's Arab background, and following several complaints from clients who believe Jassim poses a threat to national security regarding water resources in the region, Marcus chooses to terminate Jassim's employment. Having an Arab employee is no longer financially beneficial for the firm. Marcus admits, “‘Bottom line, we are going to lose the business if I don't make an act of good faith to the people we do business with.’ ‘And firing me is your act of good faith?’ ‘Yes,’ though he didn't like the way that sounded” (Halaby, 2007).

Here, I believe Jassim is depicted as a tool for the firm's benefit, with his employment seen as having a finite duration. The narrative also illustrates how the company's interest takes precedence over individual concerns, despite Jassim's extensive experience in the field of water and his excellent economic status and social standing. In fact, Lefebvre's (1991) concept of “production of space” considers how space is shaped by social relations and economic structures:

The breaking-up of space gives rise to conflict when two disconnected contents [...] tend towards a single form (organization). [...] In such cases the community comes under the absolute rule of the company, i.e. the rule of the company's (capitalist) owners. Employees tend to lose their status as free workers [...] retaining mastery over whatever time they do not give up in the form of labour time to the capitalist. (p. 318)

Jassim being depicted as a tool for the firm's benefit reflects the production of space within the workplace, where economic interests and power dynamics influence the role and position of individuals. This perspective sheds light on how Jassim's situation exemplifies Lefebvre's theory, where organizational spaces can prioritize economic imperatives over individual rights and contributions.

Therefore, integrating Lefebvre's perspective clarifies that Jassim's narrative reflects broader themes of spatial production within corporate environments. His story illustrates the

tensions and conflicts that arise when economic interests dominate over individual agency and merit, echoing Lefebvre's critique of how capitalist enterprises can subsume social relations under the imperatives of profit and control.

In essence, the aftermath of 9/11 profoundly affects immigrants like Jassim. The surge in patriotism post-9/11 leads to increased surveillance, politicizing workplaces, and hindering innocent individuals' careers. Jassim's story illustrates how these events shape spatial practices and representation, impacting diasporic Arab American communities. Ultimately, his experience highlights the challenges immigrants face in a post-9/11 America, where economic interests often outweigh individual rights within the capitalist system.

2.2 The Bank as a Political Space

In her professional role, Salwa enjoys a successful career in banking and real estate brokerage, affording her the material comforts that outwardly confirm her realization of the American dream. However, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent politicization of the workspace have brought about substantial changes in Salwa's behavior, particularly within the interplay of gender dynamics and social class. This interconnection significantly influences Salwa's interactions with her workspace, prompting noticeable shifts in her approach and engagement in the professional environment.

For instance, during her regular work at the bank, Salwa experiences verbal harassment from a bank client, “a native Tucsonan, American born and raised,” who refuses to discuss her bank account with Salwa, stating she prefers someone she can “understand better” (Halaby, 2007, p. 114). When this American client inquires about Salwa's ethnicity, Salwa's response unnerves her: “What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan? *Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?*” (Halaby, 2007). This reaction reflects the heightened xenophobia that swept the United States following President George W. Bush's infamous statement before Congress on September 20, 2001, where he, in reference to Arabs and Muslims, notoriously declared: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”.

It could be argued that the woman's reaction towards Salwa in the bank was influenced by the prevailing post-9/11 sentiments. As Agamben (2005) notes, “To show law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation to law means to open a space between them for human action, which once claimed the name of 'politics.' Politics has suffered a lasting eclipse because it has been contaminated by law, seeing itself, at best, as constituent power (that is, violence that makes law)” (p. 88). This perspective underscores how the intertwining of legal frameworks and societal norms can exacerbate the marginalization of individuals like Salwa, who navigate their identities within a politically charged environment.

Portrayed as a racialized outsider, Salwa scornfully and furiously asks the American woman if she would like to work with a person from a marginalized group such as “a Mexican man” (Halaby, 2007). This quotation illustrates Salwa's frustration with the verbal harassment she faces in the workplace due to her Arab identity. By invoking other marginalized identities such as Mexican Americans, Salwa highlights the pervasive nature of prejudice and challenges the woman to confront her own biases. This rhetorical question forces the woman, and the reader, to consider the arbitrary and unjust nature of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or gender. This harassment becomes a part of her lived space, shaping her daily encounters within the bank. In terms of Lefebvre's (1991) “lived space,” Salwa's experience of verbal harassment directly

influences her perception of the bank space. Her confrontation with the American woman demonstrates how space is not neutral but is imbued with social relations and power dynamics. Salwa's living space at the bank is marked by racial prejudice and exclusion, making it a site of conflict and resistance.

Through the lens of assimilation and hybridity, Salwa navigates her cultural conflicts by simultaneously engaging with her Arab identity while attempting to blend into the mainstream American workplace. Salwa's rhetorical question challenges the prejudices of her clients and coworkers, showcasing her resilience against discrimination. By invoking other marginalized identities, she not only addresses her own struggles but also fosters a sense of solidarity among various minority groups. This hybrid identity allows her to confront prejudice while retaining her cultural roots, exemplifying the complexities of navigating a bicultural existence. Salwa's interactions, particularly with her coworker Jack, further illustrate this process of assimilation as she seeks refuge and understanding within a relationship that transcends the boundaries of racial and cultural differences. In this way, she gradually constructs a Third Space where her identity can coexist with the dominant culture, illustrating the potential for cultural negotiation in overcoming conflict.

Furthermore, the quotation reveals the intersectionality of discrimination, showing how different forms of marginalization can overlap and compound. Salwa's mention of a Mexican man underscores that various minority groups face similar struggles against systemic bias and social exclusion. By drawing these parallels, Halaby emphasizes the need for solidarity among marginalized communities and the importance of addressing all forms of discrimination to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

In the context of politics and due to 9/11, Halaby, through Salwa's case, highlights the damaging impact of racial prejudice and negative stereotypes on Arab American Muslims. The portrayal of Arab Muslims as evil people, extremists, and terrorists contributes to their exclusion and marginalization, emphasizing the importance of addressing such biases for a more inclusive and just society. Salwa's rhetorical question exposes the absurdity and injustice of such stereotypes, urging a re-evaluation of societal attitudes towards minority groups.

Simultaneously, Salwa begins to experience a sense of alienation and marginalization within her work environment. This is not only due to the actions of the American client but also because of her boss, Joan, at the bank. Joan offers her a U.S. flag to put on her car in an attempt to confront the racism. Consequently, Salwa comes to the realization that mainstream Americans do not see her as one of them; instead, they view her as a racialized outsider. As her boss says, "You should put one on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking and having this will let them know where you stand" (Halaby, 2007).

In the same context, Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "perceived space" is relevant here. Salwa's sense of alienation and marginalization contributes to the perceived space within the bank. The subjective meanings she attributes to her workplace shape her understanding of social relations and power dynamics within the organization. Lefebvre discusses the concept of alienation in relation to consciousness and identity as a material relationship: "*Consciousness of oneself and of the other, of the body and of the abstract realm of otherness and of becoming-other (alienation)*" (p. 187). In other words, Salwa's sense of alienation in the workplace contributes to her perceived space, and the broader concept of consciousness of oneself and others resonates with the idea of

how individuals subjectively interpret and navigate their spatial surroundings within the social and political dynamics of the bank.

Indeed, Halaby challenges the common assertion that Muslim women lack agency to actively participate in public spaces by introducing an alternative perspective. In this narrative, Salwa emerges as an independent, educated, and peace-loving individual, showcasing a different facet of the situation. Simultaneously, Salwa experiences the impact of post-9/11 tensions, which alienate her from the mainstream and hinder her gradual acceptance into whiteness—a process initially facilitated by her upper-middle-class status. As a result, Salwa is perceived differently in her workspace, reflecting the changed dynamics arising from these post-9/11 tensions. It is worth noting that Salwa experiences a sense of abandonment in her workspace as she no longer feels included in the mainstream. Consequently, she forms a connection with Joan, who represents the mainstream that Salwa aspires to join. Halaby states:

Not for the first time Salwa wondered why Joan, who was so very American and patriotic, reminded her of someone from home. Not anyone in particular, just as someone whose warm nosiness forced its way into your heart, whether or not you liked the person or agreed with her politics. (Halaby, 2007)

Salwa's sense of abandonment resonates with her feeling excluded from the mainstream. The connection she forms with Joan holds significance; Joan embodies the very essence of mainstream America that Salwa yearns to embrace. This connection poignantly reflects Salwa's deep-seated desire for inclusion and a sense of belonging within the broader societal context.

Asserting her argument, Halaby contends that an individual's faith or identity is not subject to determination by either whiteness or social class. These factors should not be decisive for individuals, regardless of their economic status, ethnic origins, or physical appearance. In contrast to Jassim, Salwa becomes increasingly cognizant of the racial prejudice in her workspace inherent in the post-9/11 mindset, and notably, this awareness is not contingent on her social class or economic status. As a result, within her workspace, Salwa starts to undergo a transformation in her identity, feeling more and more distant from her colleagues. However, following an incident at the bank where Salwa perceives racial abuse from the white American woman, Jack's support becomes a source of comfort and acceptance for her. Jack, her co-worker, serves as a refuge in this challenging situation. Halaby describes social relationships in the U.S. this way:

Here in America, no one said anything, no one intruded in other people's business or stopped things like this from occurring. No one tiptoed into the dark rooms of other people's homes with their buckets of judgment and said what they really thought. There were no intrusive neighbors or blunt aunties to announce what they knew and say, "You'd better not, or else. (Halaby, 2007)

Halaby's observation highlights a cultural norm in American society valuing privacy and non-interference. This contrasts sharply with Salwa's experience of racial abuse in the workplace, where such norms are violated. Jack's support for Salwa stands out as an act of empathy and solidarity amid societal norms of non-intrusion being breached.

By juxtaposing Halaby's reflection with Salwa's experience, the profound impact of interpersonal support in navigating identity challenges discrimination. This contrast underscores complexities in American society, where ideals of privacy and autonomy coexist with instances of prejudice and exclusion. Salwa's connection with Jack symbolizes her quest for understanding and

acceptance in a society marked by post-9/11 tensions and cultural divisions. This relationship embodies her effort to create her own Third Space, where she negotiates her identity and finds solace amidst the conflicting dynamics of her workplace.

In this context, Lefebvre's theory provides a framework to explore social relations within spatial contexts. Salwa's close connection with Jack can be interpreted as a deliberate effort to negotiate her identity within the social space of the bank. This relationship serves as a strategic means for Salwa to reclaim a sense of social inclusion and protection amidst the workplace dynamics.

Lefebvre (1991) emphasizes that social relations, though abstract, are fundamentally grounded in spatial dimensions. He asserts, "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial. In each particular case, the connection between this underpinning and the relations it supports calls for analysis" (p. 404). Therefore, Salwa's bond with Jack exemplifies how interpersonal connections within physical spaces influence social dynamics.

Analyzing this spatial underpinning is crucial for understanding the nuances of social relations within the bank. Salwa's interaction with Jack not only reflects her personal quest for acceptance but also illustrates broader themes of identity negotiation and belonging in the context of post-9/11 societal tensions. By delving into the spatial aspects of their relationship, deeper insights are gained into how individuals navigate and shape their social environments.

Salwa's career success initially embodies the American dream, but post-9/11, her workplace becomes politicized, leading to discrimination and alienation. Despite her social class, she faces exclusion from mainstream acceptance, seeking refuge in connections with people like her coworker Jack. This underscores the complex interplay between political dynamics, social relations, and spatial contexts within the workplace.

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby effectively uses the firm and the bank as microcosms to explore the intersection of professional spaces and political tensions in post-9/11 America. Jassim's experiences in his firm and Salwa's challenges at the bank reveal how racial profiling and xenophobia infiltrate their professional and personal lives. These environments become battlegrounds where their identities and aspirations are continually challenged by societal prejudices. Halaby's narrative highlights the harsh realities faced by Arab Americans, illustrating that the promise of the American dream is often overshadowed by systemic discrimination and the struggle for acceptance in a politically charged environment.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* provides a powerful insight into the processes of politicization of American workplaces after 9/11 and the effects of the new wave of patriotism on Arab American professionals. Halaby employs the characters of Jassim and Salwa to depict how the concept of nationalism has seeped into workplaces and other institutions to become a tool of spying, repression, and prejudice. This politicization changes the course of careers and the day-to-day experiences of employees, especially those of Arab origin, and demonstrates the relationship between the self and society.

The portrayal of the firm and the bank as political spaces in the novel is a good example of what Lefebvre refers to as social space, which shows how these environments become a site for the contestation of identity, power, and citizenship. Halaby's respective vision underscores the

interconnection between space and social relations, showing how the workplace is a site of struggle over the meanings of national security and the self.

In this narrative, Halaby questions the concept of the American Dream and the struggles that Arab Americans have to go through in order to achieve professional success and assimilate into American society. The author's depiction of Jassim's and Salwa's experiences in their workplaces is a commentary on the effects of post-9/11 policies and attitudes on society.

Finally, *once in a Promised Land* offers a complex analysis of the effects of political interference in professional environments and calls for readers to think about the ramifications of blind nationalism and racism. Halaby's work is significant in that it links workplace relations to global and national politics, thus providing insight into how global events and national sentiments can alter the most basic aspects of people's lives, including their sense of identity, professionalism, and the American Dream.

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Ethical Declarations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity and research ethics. Since the research did not involve human participants, there was no need for informed consent or other participant-related ethical procedures. However, all data sources and materials used in the research were handled responsibly and with due regard for intellectual property rights. The research process adhered to the principles of accuracy, transparency, and reliability to ensure the integrity of the findings.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets collected and analyzed during this study are available from the researchers upon request.

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Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

- Mohammad Ibrahim and Mahmoud Zidan conceptualized and designed the study, in addition to collecting and analyzing the data.
- The first draft of the manuscript was written by Mohammad Ibrahim and Mahmoud Zidan.
- The researchers reviewed and edited the text and approved the final version for publication.

Consent for Publication

The researchers agree to submit this paper for publication and await the editorial decision after the peer-review process, agreeing to its publication. They also confirm that this work has not been previously published and has not been submitted to any other journal for consideration.

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