
Laila Lalami: Narrating North African Migration to Europe

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Introduction

Laila Lalami, author of three novels—*Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), *Secret Son* (2009), and *The Moor's Account* (2014)—and several short stories, has been considered the most important Moroccan author writing in English; her work has been translated into more than eleven languages (Mehta 117). Compelled to write in a language that is not her mother tongue, Lalami's narrations constitute a form of diasporic writing from within. She succeeds in defying not only the visual and cultural vilification of Muslims, but also the prevailing neo-orientalist concept of Muslim women's writing as exclusively victim or escapee narratives. Up to now, the focus of most Moroccan migration stories "has been on male migrants as individuals, without reference to women, who nowadays constitute about 50% of international migration. . . . This has led to the neglect of women in migration theories" (Ennaji and Sadiqui 8, 14).

As the result of labor migration and family reunification (twenty percent of Moroccan citizens now live in Europe), combined with the geographic proximity of Europe and North Africa, the notion of a national or "native" literature is slightly unstable with regard to Morocco. Its literary production is not limited by the borders of the nation-state, but spills over to the European continent, where the largest Moroccan-descent communities are in France (over a million), Spain (800,000), the Netherlands (370,000), and Belgium (200,000).

Contemporary Moroccan literature does more than criticize and rebel against the *Makhzen*, a term that originally refers to the storehouse where tribute and taxes to the sultan were stowed; through the centuries Makhzen has come to signify not just the power holders in Morocco, but how power has been exercised throughout society. While most people imagine Morocco as among the more progressive, moderate, and developed countries in the Arab world, it in fact ranks below Egypt (a country with which it has long been favorably compared) in its levels of human development, equality, and political freedom. Rather than tie Moroccan writings to their "national" place

of origin, critics must re-conceptualize the idea of a “Moroccan” literature in light of, and informed by, the transnational *and* plurilingual experiences from which it arises.

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits

In *Hope and other Dangerous Pursuits*, Lalami goes beyond exploring immigration to Spain in order to depict the past, the present, and the future of thorny Hispano-Moroccan relations. The polyhedral configuration of her narrative subverts rigid European narrative forms by introducing a flexible and pragmatic aesthetic sense, more akin to African oral traditions. It denounces the fate of a group of young Moroccans of both genders who abandon the depressing reality of a corrupt regime, unemployment, gender discrimination, and class warfare to sail across the Mediterranean. The characters narrate their stories of in-betweenness and their reflections on post-colonial Morocco. Rahal, the human trafficker, leads thirty passengers to an undisclosed space. Human trafficking finds fertile ground on both sides of the Mediterranean, often helped by the Spanish Guardia Civil, who greatly benefit from the desperation of the emigrants (Alami 145). Rahal, a name derived from the word “rihla,” a trip or narration about travel, epitomizes nomadism, displacement, and non-belonging. In fact, his name strikingly reflects the wanderer’s longing for “a mythic place of desire” (192).

Further, the “patera” (raft) turns into an antagonistic geography of homelessness and non-belonging. As Suman Gupta argues, it becomes an in-between space that shapes characters’ identities: “A place of incommensurable contradiction. The term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject” (11).

Feelings of exclusion haunt the characters as they board the death boat that links the past, when powerful leaders (Tarik Ibn Ziyad) were conquerors and transmitters of a rich Arab-Islamic culture, to the present where death and life seem to be interchangeable. As Rachid Nini in *Diario de un ilegal* ‘Diary of an illegal immigrant’, 2002, pertinently reminds us, the trip to Spain in a six meter-long Zodiac presents a symbolic inverse of the crossing in 711 CE by the Amazigh-Berber, Governor of Tangier (Alami 144). Murad, the principal narrator of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, reflects upon the times when the Moors “established an empire that ruled over Spain” and the present situation: “Little did they know that we’d be back. . . . Only instead

of a fleet . . . , here we are in an inflatable boat—not just Moors, but a motley mix of people from the ex-colonies, without guns and armor, without a charismatic leader” (3). Rahal, a cunning *barraga* (“burner”/human trafficker) and heartless captain of the Zodiac, is vehemently contrasted with the charismatic Tarik Ibn Ziyad, conqueror of Al-Andalus. The Moors’ heroic fleet and the successes it achieved are ironically juxtaposed with the inflatable boat that illegally seeks to throw the huddled emigrant mass onto Spanish shores. The return of the North Africans creates anxiety in Spain over what Daniela Flesler calls “The Return of the Moor” in her homonymous book.

Hope and other Dangerous Pursuits opens *in media res* with the introduction of the four characters: Murad, a street hustler; Halima, a woman on the run from her husband; Aziz, an unemployed mechanic; and Faten, a religious fanatic. Each chapter focuses on the characters’ lives before the trip, exploring the reasons for their choices. Then, the story chronologically jumps forward to reveal what happens to them after the trip, and queries whether the rewards are worth the risk.

In Faten’s story, “The Fanatic”/ “The Odalisque,” and a short story “The Turning Tide,” a narrative that proceeds *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Lalami decries the misery of her female characters by disrupting the stereotypical image of Moroccan women as illiterate, voiceless objects who are defeated and unrecognized by society and bereft of all spaces—either inside society or within the women themselves. Lalami’s female characters declare themselves free of patriarchal shackles, tradition, and home. If “home” is regarded as a space of confinement and obedience, the female characters symbolically destabilize this pre-established notion by leaving “home,” “the country,” “the inside,” and transcend geographical, historical, and cultural boundaries through the act of migration. Faten transgresses cultural and religious boundaries and articulates a hybrid identity that resists fixedness, stability, and patriarchy. It manifests a new mobile, unstable, and liberal subjectivity that responds to calls of “modernity” in twenty-first century Morocco. Simultaneously, Faten poses a threat to the Moroccan Europeanized elite by contesting their Westernized lifestyles through her appearance and convictions (Mehta 140). The intercultural outlook enables her to question dominant culture-bound stereotypes of womanhood, regardless of origin. Brinda Mehta affirms that Lalami’s short stories are, to date, the only narratives that focus more fully on the “women of the Straits” (116). Interestingly, Marlene de la Cruz-Guzmán reads the four stories in the novel through what is called

Mgbribiyya consciousness (137), a concept of *female cognizance* that must be articulated on its own and in opposition to *feminist consciousness*—a Western construction (138). In other words, *Mgbribiyya* constitutes a culture-centered solution to women's oppression within Moroccan groundings. The spirit of women's empowerment is related to the artful reweaving of Jenara's image (de la Cruz-Guzmán 137, Alami 152), a meta-story told by the character Murad in "The Storyteller." The tale depicts the growth of Jenara as a woman against the cultural production of a "traditional Berber" rug. The rug is transgressive in its representation of an angry, unveiled woman with a knife in hand; she murders a demented Sultan who took her from her beloved fiancée and her family: "her emancipation is not dependent on a male, . . . but on her plan to end the injustice to which she has been subjected" (de la Cruz-Guzmán 137).

In "The Fanatic," Faten is a young veiled Islamist student who endures a hard life with her mother in a shantytown in Rabat. After cheating on an exam and making a "derogatory comment about King Hassan within earshot of a snitch" (129), she is expelled from the university. Faten is consequently urged by her Imam to leave the country because the police are hounding her. In Morocco, Faten befriends Noura, a westernized, modern, well-off girl. Regardless of Noura's family rejection of Faten, she has a great impact on Noura, who opts for putting on the hijab, reading Egyptian author and political activist Sayyid Qutb (*Milestones*), and watching Islamic oriented programs. The lower class Faten is not viewed favorably by Noura's middle-upper class parents, who are horror stricken by Faten's influence on their daughter. The narrative meticulously draws attention to the movement of Islamic fundamentalism that saw its proliferation after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Furthermore, Faten's faith in a new religiosity complements the revolutionary praxis to decolonize Morocco from the "evils" of globalization, class injustice, and gender prejudice (Mehta 140).

As Mehta explains, the choice of objects locates Arab women within two binary extremes, that of religious fanatics or that of lascivious odalisques, dangerous and seductive symbols of religious and moral "deviance" to be "naturalized" by assimilation and sex in a colonial rescue narrative. In other words, Islam in Spain can be minimized in its influence by controlling women through the multinational industry of condoms as an effective population check (Mehta 145). As indicated by Mohja Kahf: "The recurrent drama of incipient colonization, that of a heroic male conquest of a feminized

Oriental land is played out in literature upon the inert body of the Muslim woman” (8). Later, Faten crosses the Strait of Gibraltar, gaining access to Spain after being raped by a member of the Guardia Civil. Because of the traumatic experience and her joblessness in Spain, Faten turns to prostitution. Through Faten, we are able to probe Islamic ideological foundations and to question religious fundamentalism. Faten seems to embrace her role as a fallen woman; however, Martín, a Madrid client, hints at “rescuing her.” Meanwhile, Faten wonders whether Noura is still wearing the hijab in Morocco. Noura, in Faten’s eyes, possesses the “luxury of faith,” along with “the luxury of no faith” (138). Faten looks back at when she befriended Noura with the aim of “fighting back” against the morals and corrupt behavior exhibited by the latter’s father. The veil can be a powerful political tool or symbol to denote resistance among women who choose to wear it (Al-Hassan Golley, “Is Feminism?” 522). Women’s bodies are a battlefield for the post-colonial cultural struggle between new capitalist forces that pressure women to be more sexual and seductive and old traditionalist ones that force them to be asexual, conservative, and prudish. (Al-Hassan Golley, “Is Feminism?” 527-28).¹

Now, in Madrid, Faten shares the street with immigrant women from Romania and Ukraine. Competing geographies of dispossession from the global South and the Eastern bloc vie for ascendancy in a globalized prostitution ring that provides invisible (working-class) service to the insatiable Spanish cravings for the exotic (Mehta 143). Fixated in a zone of dependency, stigmatized in the designation of underdevelopment, and ruled by a superior-metropolitan colonizer who is positioned as a categorically antithetical overlord, Faten becomes subservient to Martín. Regardless of Martín’s “good intentions,” the reader can observe that his desires require that Faten should remain submissive, reminding us of Edward Said’s concept of the colonized subject as: “Fixed in zones of dependency and peripherally, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonized who was theoretically positioned as a categorically antithetical overlord” (*Reflections* 295).

When Martín questions her about her past in Morocco, Faten becomes a sort of storyteller to fool him: “I didn’t see much of my father. I spent all my days in the harem. . . . They initiated me in the art of pleasing men” (142). Once she realizes that Martín is “pleased with the game” (142) and claims that he has read “about the duties of the woman to the man and

all that [in Morocco]” (142), Faten understands that Martín was not different than his own father, an anti-immigrant and Army lieutenant who had served under Franco. Similar to de la Cruz-Guzmán’s perspective quoted above, Fedwa Māltī Duġlās focuses on the female body through the image of Scheherazade, an analogous discourse about (a false) identity shaped by Western stereotypes that Faten gives to Martín:

There is an explosive relationship among sexuality, the body, and woman’s voice in the Arabo-Islamic sphere. . . . Shahrazād demonstrates to her literary cousins and descendants that an intimate relationship must be created between writing and the body. [She is] a sexual being, who manipulates discourse (and men) through her body. It is the latter that permits her to speak, as male violence is met with her sexuality, articulated through her body and words. At the same time, Shahrazād uses narrative to redirect desire and, hence, sexuality. (5, 6, 11)²

By allowing the storyteller (false historian) to manipulate both literary and religious discourses, Fadia Suyoufie and Fadia Faqir emphasize the fallacy of patriarchal hegemony (Suyoufie 231, Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* 29).

Ahmed Idrissi Alami clearly points out the relationship between colonizer-colonized in the memory of the Rif’s success in defeating the Spanish army in the Battle of Annual in 1921, and in Spain’s brutal revenge through the dispersal of mustard gas across the Rif (153). For Faten, it triggers memories about what she has been told of the Rif War and its heroic figure, Abdelkarim al-Khatabbi: “Hearing the Generalissimo’s name stirred in Faten memories about her maternal grandfather, a proud Rifi who’d lost his eyesight during the rebellion in the north. It was mustard gas, he’d told his children, and he’d spent the rest of his life begging for a gun to put an end to it all” (132).

Evidently, the past legacy of conflict and aggression continues to overshadow the present and shape the contours of Hispano-Moroccan future relations since, as Homi Bhabha avers, the experience of colonial time events in postcolonial era “impels the past, projects it, gives its dead symbols the circulatory file of the sign of the present” (*Location* 254, Alami 154). Along with Bhabha, Alami, and Gloria Anzaldúa, we can conclude that the prohibited and the forbidden are the inhabitants of the borderland: “In short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’ Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The

only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power" (Anzaldúa 25).

Moreover, Martín finds in Faten a source of fantasy, a dish to be consumed, with skin "like black olives," and breasts "like mangoes" (131). Such a view perpetuates the stereotyped and limited position often accorded to Muslim women; "it projects the female as 'body,' a subject to male/female gaze. Yet, conceived as a strategy of appropriation, it re-enacts a masculine pose in a traditional area reserved exclusively for males" (Suyoufie 227). Revolting against being framed within such position, Faten suggests that Martín choose Spanish girls like Isabel to fulfill his sexual desires. Martín replies, "Women in his country don't know how to treat men. Not the way you Arab girls do" (142). By saying the latter, Martín indicates that he does not see himself in a powerful position with Spanish women and hence resorts to the Eurocentric self/other pattern where he could gain capital in relation with an Arab/Muslim woman. Faten firmly refuses this position as the object of the hegemonic male gaze as well as a cultural artifact, which relegates her to a lower position as a defeated othered female "illegal" resident in Spain. Faten frees herself from the oppression of a man for her own purposes; she takes action against injustice as, according to Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, is the Moroccan and Islamic tradition of women's vociferous activism—"a more realistic and practical way not just of representing women but also changing their lives" ("Is Feminism Relevant?" 522, 527, also qtd. in de la Cruz-Guzmán 137). When Faten exits Martín's car, she reminds him defiantly that "I think you should find yourself someone else next time" (143).

Along the lines of Lalami's narrative, Assia Djebar criticizes the well-intentioned, ignorant stranger who is convinced, beyond proof, that the benighted Muslim woman must be "rescued" (12, 14, 60):

We saw at the beginning how the women of Islam . . . are speaking of their

liberation . . . with what splendid and sometimes tragic leaps into the future, from a thousand servitudes; from the oppression and from the heavy crust of the past. It is freeing itself—and the women at its heart as surely—with great strength because it is the strength of faith: faith in itself and faith in God (40).

It is only in finding Faten's own definition of self, as a culturally-centered self-assured Moroccan woman, that she is able to escape those identities superimposed by Noura's father and Martín.

The story ends with Faten progressing financially "now [that] she

could buy anything she wanted” (144), and expressing how grateful she is for finding out the “truth” (145): progress and possibilities were not given by anyone else, particularly men, and her future depends on obtaining and acquiring freedom of movement, body, and mind. This end reminds us of Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa’s desire of building “a room of her own,” taking satisfaction on living of her new hybrid culture that is built upon her own thoughts, her own hands and body, with her own “feminist architecture”:

She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking her inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. . . . Battered and bruised she waits, her bruises throwing her back upon herself and the rhythmic pulse of her feminine. . . . *Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía. En la soledad Ella prospera* ‘In solitude, her rebelliousness rises. In solitude, she prospers’ (22-23).

Faten’s refusal to succumb to Martín’s desires continues a meaningful act of non-compliance with the Eurocentric male worldview. She does not want to extend the colonial regime of cultural appropriation and hence subverts the colonial moral systems imposed upon indigenous ones. Faten’s self-determination leads to a kind of reconciliation with her Moroccan past. Besides rejecting Martín, Faten decides to stay home on *Eid* (last day of Ramadan) rather than to go out to work, which suggests that she is changing her attitude toward Islamic principles. Furthermore, she settles a domestic problem with her roommate, Betoul, “one of those immigrants with the installment program—she sent regular checks in the mail to [her brothers and sisters]” (142). The women eat together, an indication of reconciliation with Faten’s home culture and, consequently, Faten enjoys her life, her profits, and her own identity. The two women recognize the irony of Betoul’s position in relation to her employer. Betoul describes how the latter, a female Spaniard, did not go to work that day; rather she spent it in bed crying because she deems herself “too fat” and “undesirable” for her husband. This leaves Betoul to take over as caretaker, making the lunch, and altering her boss’ pants to accommodate her increasing weight. As Ahmed Idrissi Alami points out, “Betoul stands in as a ‘mother’ while Faten, in her role of satisfier of sexual needs, can be seen as the cause of the Spanish woman’s tears, as the wife implies that someone else, perhaps a prostitute . . . , perhaps even Faten, is sexually satisfying her husband” (149).

Therefore, for “The Odalisque,” Spain turns into a space of identity

negotiation, and a transitory moment in the life of the marginalized prostitute who suffers the pangs of homelessness and alienation. Faten's identity oscillates between Islamic fundamentalism and a fake European progressivism. She embraces the diasporic transnational position that contests all essentialist frames of reference that she inherits. She somewhat embodies the perspective of the diasporic subject by voicing compelling evidence that women are not always silenced subjects with no agency or voice. Thus, together with Fadia Suyoufie, I can say that Laila Lalami indulges in a form of "writing back" to the patriarchy with mounting self-confidence: "Arab women writers manipulate traditional material in their fiction and marks the personal, aesthetic, and political aspects of their contact with tradition" (216-17).

The author reclaims the art of storytelling by recasting the role of women in a tradition that is mainly a "male" prerogative. Her appropriation of tradition is intended as a subversion of existing orders that limit women's freedom (Suyoufie 247). In Lalami's portrayal of Faten, she transgresses feelings of nostalgia for a remote past that haunts many diasporic subjectivities. More striking in Lalami's text is the willingness to address barriers that female Moroccan literature still faces, such as raising gender issues and sexuality with more openness and audacity.

Halima is the main character in "Bus Rides" and "The Saint." She is presented as a humble and moderate woman who lives near the Old Medina in Casablanca. A victim of domestic abuse, Halima's fight for freedom is similar to Jenara's, but instead of taking justice into her own hands, she first seeks to do it legally. When she realizes that her husband, Maati, is not going to allow her to keep the children after divorce, her initial reaction is to "bribe the judge" (55). After being accused by her own mother of misbehavior and of "talking back" to her husband (54), Halima finds a sorcerer who provides her with a powder to "soften" her husband's attitude and thus stop the beatings. However, the beatings continue, and Halima starts thinking of choosing a different paradigm for herself and her three children by joining her brothers in Europe (71). The "patera" capsizes and she returns to Casablanca. According to de la Cruz-Guzmán, the journey fails because Halima has to "confront the misogyny of her husband in the context of a supportive community" (143). The *Mghribiyya* empowerment and the healing of Halima's trauma can only occur in her home country. Maati reconsiders his initial request for money in exchange for divorce, and Halima joins "the hordes of day workers at the market" (114-15), renting a room in the Sidi-Moumen

slum in Casablanca, doing laundry, and cooking *begbrir* (bread) for others.

In my view, the two parts of the Halima's story coincide with the former *Mouadawana*, the Moroccan Family Code that impeded women's equality to men before the law, by curtailing their divorce rights, property ownership, inheritances, and by dismissing Mohamed VI's 2004 issuance defining a family as one composed of two equal partners before the law, a husband and a wife. At any rate, after the Reform of 2004, Moha Ennaji, Guida El Khayat and Khadija Ryadi concur that family members carry out most of the violence against women, and that violence permeates all social groups. As long as the present system of domination remains, and legal and social inequality continues, both men and the State will feel legitimized to pursue violence against women. While Arab women may have reached varying degrees of achievements in terms of their equality with men in different Arab nation states, a result of the modernist thinking of influential male intellectuals and/or the strength of Arab feminist struggle, the Arab social structure remains invariably patriarchal (Ennaji, 209, El Khayat, *La mujer* 31, Ryadi n/p). This gender-based typecasting is nevertheless reinforced by a culture of silencing surrounding questions of domestic and sexual violence, whereby these abuses, according to Ennaji, "continue to be considered a private matter" and "do not represent a human rights violation or a crime that needs serious investigation and analysis" (209). Ennaji continues: "Violence against women continues to be surrounded by silence. As a consequence, violence against women is underestimated" (209, qtd in Mehta 127).³ When the narration commences to adjudicate the "good luck" of Halima after her return to Casablanca, and the possible sainthood of her son Farid, Halima not only curses Satan for such beliefs, but also keeps working hard and earns a decent living for her and her children. Alami and de la Cruz-Guzmán argue that the defeat of her ex-husband indicates the rejection by the community of unjust practices of the 'demented man' just as is the case with Jenara (de la Cruz-Guzmán 143, Alami 152-53). Murad's deployment of artistic design in his narrative provides a posture that conflicts with the basic tenet of the Western concept of art, which maintains that the essential value of material culture lies outside the context of its meaning and use (de la Cruz-Guzmán 143, Alami 152-53, M'Closkey 8). At the end of the story, when Halima becomes a role model in her community and finds money to take her mother to a doctor to cure her arthritis, she builds a women-centered community of her own like Jenara's harem (de la Cruz-Guzmán 143). The cultural centering

is premised upon “the extent to which ideological shifts are reflective of indigenous social change” (Al-Hassan Golley, “Is Feminism Relevant?” 529).

Aziz Ammor’s and Murad Idrissi’s stories, “Acceptance,” “Better Luck Tomorrow,” “Homecoming” and “Storytelling” are integrally connected to the women in their lives and, ultimately, become alienated from them by the economic hardships of their class and gender. Contrary to Shahnaz Kahn’s assertion that Muslim woman can only be members of religious communities and not thoughtful independent individuals (xii), Lalami uses these male characters to narrate women’s emancipation. Wanting so much to make a living and provide for his young wife, Aziz Amor boards the raft for Spain in search of work. After being deported on his first attempt, he spends a few months in Tangier hustling before attempting to emigrate again. His second attempt is successful and, over a five-year period, he manages to find enough work to rent himself an apartment in Madrid and send some money home to his family. Finally returning to Morocco for a visit and hoping to bring his wife, Zohra, back to Spain, Aziz finds Casablanca a depressed city, riddled with unemployment, poverty, and backwardness. During an emotional reunion with Zohra and his mother, Aziz paints a rosy picture of Spain for family and friends, neglecting to mention his invisibility in the eyes of native Spaniards. Failing to convince Zohra to return to Madrid with him, Aziz again leaves for Spain alone. De la Cruz-Guzmán observes that Zohra is the empowered character in Lalami’s narrative. Zohra outshines him by remaining firmly entrenched in her community and finding economic personal fulfillment in her woman role while Aziz is in Spain.

Zhora is secure in her community, has strong family support, and is close to her sister. Like Jenara, she is firmly grounded, and she is the daughter of a well-off family who thought that she married beneath her because Aziz was unemployed. She knows that she is technically left behind, but her material and community life will not change substantially with her husband’s departure: “she has always been the practical one” (90). Upon Aziz’s return to his parents’ apartment in Casablanca, he expects to be the heroic figure bringing marks of progress and economic security, but he is shocked by his wife’s lack of admiration for his accomplishments abroad. She is clearly in charge of her own life as she refuses to go to Spain and tells him, “I don’t know if that’s the life for me” (170). At the time of his second departure, Zhora’s tears are not from sadness but from the joy felt at remaining behind with her family and community along with the realization that her matrimo-

nial relationship with Aziz is over.

Feeling inadequate as man of the house now that his father is dead, Murad, the protagonist in the novel tied to Western ideology and culture, allows himself to be persuaded by hustler/smuggler Rahal that he can have a better life in Spain. Selling some of his mother's jewelry to come up with the twenty thousand *dirhams* necessary to guarantee his place in the raft, Murad sets off for Spain with Faten, Halima, and Aziz. After being deported by the Guardia Civil, Murad returns to his mother's house in Tangier but, humiliated, refuses to be seen in public. Murad spends several listless months moping around his mother's house until he finally jumps at the opportunity to help manage a gift shop specializing in traditional Moroccan wares. Happy to be working again, Murad slowly realizes that all of his daydreaming and living in the future have made him unaware of his past. Murad's plotline also leads the reader to the original premise for the *Mghribiyya* female consciousness in the book, Jenara. While in his shopkeeper job, he has time to read. He then begins to remember his father and grandfather's stories as well as to concretize his own depictions of his homeland. Significantly, it is after recounting Jenara's tale for two American girls that Murad realizes "he needed to write his own" (195) culturally centered stories and to reject the poor foreign imitations, like those of Paul Bowles. Murad has been reading Bowles and has been entertaining the idea that he might write a story aligned with the kinds of contexts and understandings characteristic of Bowles's stories.

What is very common from texts I analyzed in *¡Hay moros en la costa! Literatura marroquí fronteriza en castellano y catalán* (2014), female writers reveal an unequivocal sense of affiliation with their Islamic culture while simultaneously condemning and combating the abusive excess of the patriarchy when it appropriates and exploits religious arguments to "preserve" men's spiritual and material hegemony. For Lalami, rather than ridiculing or rejecting women's Islamic heritage, the discourse of liberation appeals to its most enlightened and progressive tradition. Religious manifestations and female autonomy are so extremely staged that they at last complement each other, finding common ground and mutual approval. However, this levelling strategy involves a non-excluding Afro-European resistance that does not solve the gender distinction included in the short story. As it happens in Najat El Hachmi's *L'últim patriarca*, there is a strong willingness to escape the shadow of patriarchal domination, bringing forth the role of the male-like woman in resistance to the phallogocentric discourse. Clearly, the discourse of the young

protagonist assumes a process of self-creation that aims at liberation through pleasure (sex) and culture (education), both hegemonic symbols of freedom in the paradigm of gender inequity.

Secret Son

In her second novel, *Secret Son*, Laila Lalami explores the religious and political underpinnings of social inequity in globalized Morocco. With deep concern and controlled pathos, Lalami follows the worsening plight of a group of slum dwellers who are plagued by economic precariousness, lack of prospects, and social alienation. As Alami suggests, the disproportionate development continues to lead a significant percentage of the Moroccan poor and lower classes to dream of either living abroad or of isolating themselves from their own wretched present (145). Lalami's teen protagonist, Youssef El Mekki, is a slum dweller in Casablanca who is briefly elevated into the upper classes, then recruited by Islamic terrorists. Youssef has begun university studies on a scholarship, fulfilling his mother Rachida's dreams, a nurse who alone raised him in a one-room shanty. His father, Rachida claims, died in Youssef's infancy. Under questioning by Youssef, she admits that his father was Nabil Amrani, scion of a wealthy family, who died in a car crash shortly before their planned marriage and Youssef's birth. At the university, Youssef envies the conspicuous consumption of "Mercedes-and-Marlboro" students. His only friends are Amin, a law student, and Maati, who works for the Party, an Islamic extremist group that operates a cafe to attract the local youth. Hatim, the Party's chairman, shows Youssef a magazine to evidence the degenerate journalism (a piece on Moroccan vintners) of a reporter named Benaboud. Also featured in the magazine is a tycoon named Nabil Amrani, who resembles Youssef, right down to the piercing blue eyes. The news precipitates Youssef's quest to find his father. After the two reunite, a drift develops between Nabil and his daughter. Youssef confronts Amrani, who is thrilled to learn that he has a son. Amrani sets Youssef up in a luxurious apartment, where he enjoys the "Mercedes- and-Marlboro" lifestyle. Amrani, hoping to groom him for the family business, helps Youssef to obtain a high-paying job. But when Amrani leaves for Los Angeles to reconcile with his estranged daughter, Amal, Youssef is summarily ejected from both job and apartment. At once, a fundamentalist group bent upon assassinating the outspoken journalist recruits him. In a far-fetched development, Hatim convinces Youssef, up to now impervious to the Party's propaganda, to see his domestic dilemma as directly linked to the persecution of Muslims. Im-

pulsively, Youssef agrees to execute Benaboud.

These links between social despair and capitalist exploitation disclose the ethos of the corruptible state that feeds on the dispensable status of its poor and wretched citizens in the name of economic profit. In this vein, *Secret Son* questions a social system that disenfranchises the marginalized uneducated class while it benefits the educated, well-connected elite. Some characters become corrupt, others become resigned, yet others find refuge and motivation in conservative Islamic preachers' teachings (Alami 145). Youssef's journey to find his father represents a quest in search of his identity. Struggling to carve out his own opportunities and escape the slum, Youssef yearns to fit at all costs into the student groups on campus during his freshman year. However, when a wealthy girl, Alia, catches his eye, his intimate friend, Amin, warns him: "Everyone should know the size of their teapot" (43). Amin reminds him that it is useless to hope for a lifestyle to which one was not born, and that the possibility of social mobility is but an illusion.

Youssef's identity predicament evinces the diasporic reminiscences of mutation and transformation. In the affluent Moroccan world, Youssef "could not bring himself to create a fake identity. He was tired of masquerades. He was Youssef El Mekki; he was his mother's son, a child of Hay An Najjat. He no longer had any wish to be someone else" (227). This makes him experience an identity crisis that results in shaping within him a project for a future terrorist. Diasporic traits are manifested in Youssef's quest for a life away from the prisms of home. His penchant for diasporic life is clearly unveiled when he presents his viewpoint about immigration. Once in an English class, Youssef had to argue against the phenomenon of immigration. Yet, he failed to think of "any reasons why anyone should stay in the country" (62). An alternative to invisibility and non-recognition in a country that fails its people is to seek elsewhere a place to belong, be it physically or ideologically. Despite the fact that so many clandestine immigrants ended up swallowed by the waters of the Mare Nostrum, Youssef is enthused with the idea of embracing a zodiac to cross the Straits in search of a European paradise: "Some people in Hay Najjat had tried hrig, and although hardly any of them had been heard of after leaving the country, he knew that if the chance arose, he, too, might be tempted to try his luck in Europe" (62). To Youssef, moving abroad is a haunting desire; thus immigration turns into a refuge of non-belongingness. El-Enany confirms that the West for many

Arabs constitutes a space of freedom; “the West for the Arab individual is no longer an oppressor but a savior, a place of refuge from the repression at home, a space of freedom with the promise of prosperity” (El-Enany 186, qtd. in Suyoufie 225). After being fired from his part-time job at Grand Hotel and, subsequently, the loss of his father for the second time, he spends all of his saved money on the lottery for the United States immigration allotment. Such attempts also turn into a fiasco because the immigration lawyer proves to be a crook.

The impoverished slum in Casablanca is a fertile landscape for certain extremist ideologies to gain ground. In fact, the narrative tries to provide an authentic map of Modern Morocco. It explores the dysfunctional politics and dispossessed psyches that allow Islamist ideologies to win converts easily. The lack of possibilities for Youssef and his friends paves the way for radical Islamists to further their agenda. After a flood in the area, the “Party” comes to the aid of locals and surreptitiously gains a toehold in inculcating the slum inhabitants with its ideologies. The possibility for Youssef to become affiliated with the Party arises when he is thrown into a protest and his ribs are broken by police just for being in the wrong place at a wrong time. As Youssef cannot go to the hospital, the Party “assists” him. Youssef then becomes prey for Hatim, the party leader, and likewise prey to discourses that seek a return to “authenticity” and “old tradition.” One witty sermon by Hatim is enough to transform Youssef into a terrorist ready to shed blood:

You must first turn to the community to state the purity it has lost. That way . . . we can reform our society from the bottom up. Our morals have become completely muddled by our blind love for the West. We have to regain the purity we lost, and we can do that through the Islamic values we have neglected. Until we can return to the roots of our faiths, until we can apply the precepts of our faiths to every single aspect of our life, we will never be able to rise above the sin, the poverty, and the misery that have befallen us (248).

The narrative reveals the connivance of official authorities and radical Islamic movements that silence the voice of liberty and democracy. The 16 May 2003 coordinated bombings that shook Casablanca are said to have been carried out by slum dwellers. Thus, Lalami seeks to diagnose the social malaise that stands behind such tragic events and ultimately offers a reading of the sociopolitical and cultural concerns that preoccupy modern Morocco.

Unlike Youssef, Amal, his half-sister, does not depend on her pa-

rental lineage to construct her own identity. In fact, she serves as the foil for Youssef's quest for a home. She gives up all the privileges ensured by her bureaucratic class and chooses instead to live with Fernando, a Latino, a hybrid and marginalized character in Los Angeles, California. In so doing, she embraces the diasporic transnational position that contests all essentialist frames of reference that she inherited from her aristocratic family. Rather, she embodies the perspective of the diasporic subject, and hence sees the unfeasibility of retrieving the home she lost. Like Samira in "The Turning Tide," women are not always silenced subjects with no agency and voice. Amal does not find Casablanca (or Morocco) how she left it because "it did not smell to her like it used to, like a cocktail of odors: tea and coffee, sea breeze and fritters, fresh bread and cigarette smoke, human urine and animal excrement" (260). Amal feels estranged from the Moroccan life style, leaving her bereft of the reassurance of belonging. When Amal behaves as an American, her parents remind her that "Home was Morocco. America was away. And there was not much more than that. You are back home now" (261). Amal's diasporic existence puts her in a position of indecision and consequently fuels her homelessness.

Conclusion

Lalami's literary work can be seen, to use Halim Barakat's words, as "novels of exposure," a narrative type that "exposes the weakness of society and its institutions without exhibiting real commitment to the restructuring of the existing order" (216). Lalami's texts become a medium of self-critique of the traditional hurdles that hinder development and expose the sociopolitical corruption resulting from the deviation from positive traditional values. Lalami, like other prominent Moroccan female writers, indulges in what Suyoufie refers to as "a form of writing back to patriarchy with mounting self-confidence. These women writers have reclaimed the art of storytelling by recasting the role of women in a tradition which is mainly a 'male' prerogative. Their appropriation of tradition is intended as a subversion of existing orders that limit women's freedom" (247).

Lalami's critique is apparent in the novel's reflections upon how Moroccan youth experiencing disparity, the absence of a transparent civil society, and the illusion of democratic values can fall victims to exploitative systems. She transgresses feelings of nostalgia that haunt many diasporic subjectivities. More pointedly, her narrative transcends Moroccan literature written in Arabic that still faces barriers which limit its ability to raise gender issues

and sexuality with openness and audacity. Nouri Gana states that “Muslim and Arab-American literature and cultural productions have been remarkably counternarrative, reactionary, and corrective” (1577), especially after 9/11. Nonetheless, this literature succeeds in defying not only “sanctioned racism and licensed visual and cultural vilification of Muslims and Arabs,” but also “a residual neo-orientalist political economy of publishing and reception that conceives Muslim women’s or men’s writing almost exclusively along the lines . . . [of] victim[hood] or escape narratives” (1577-78).

Lalami’s narrative broadens the scope of Moroccan Anglophone literature that, for decades, has been largely known only through its Franco-phone authors and/or authors who write in Arabic and are later translated into the major European languages. As a matter of fact, Anglophone Moroccan literature opens up large avenues for Moroccan literature as a whole because it addresses a potentially wider Anglophone readership and makes issues such as Moroccan identity politics, poetics of hybridity, exile, and cultural nomadism visible to Western academia. These texts chronicle a crucial period of Morocco’s modern history and weave together voices, experiences, and different Moroccan spaces to produce a postcolonial account of Morocco from outside the country.

Notes

¹ Arab feminism continues to suffer a double struggle: internally, against the old religious, social, and economic order; externally, against European colonization. While challenging European domination, the reformists still admire modern European ideals. In other words, asserting a new national identity means necessarily drawing on the very model they are resisting: the European (Al-Hassan Golley, “Is Feminism?” 529).

² This premise is questioned by Newar al-Hassan Golley who reminds us that, “[Female writers’] intention to present their material to westerners, however, makes their situation almost similar to that of European and American ethnographers who seek knowledge of what they usually see as (inferior) ‘other’ cultures” (*Reading* 91).

³ Advocates for Human Rights and Global Rights make the following comments about what they call the “on-going and chronic violence” against women in Morocco: “While it is difficult to determine the exact prevalence of domestic violence throughout Morocco, statistics that are available demonstrate that domestic violence is a widespread problem. A national

study on the prevalence of violence against women found that 62.8% of women in Morocco of ages 18–64 had been victims of some form of violence during the year preceding the study. The same study found that 55% of these acts of violence were committed by a victim's husband, and the violence was reported by the wife in only 3% of such cases. . . . There is an overall acceptance of domestic violence and a distrust of the justice system that makes it unlikely that a victim will report domestic violence" (Mehta 129). As stated by Ennaji: "Illiteracy is very high among women in Morocco despite government and civil society efforts to reduce it. Only 36% of adult women know how to read and write, against 62% for men" (204). According to Valérie Orlando, Moroccan illiteracy is estimated at 50% (xiii).

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