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Under the Western Eyes: Reading Moroccan Migrants' Tryst with Memory, Identity and Destiny in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*

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Abstract: The increasing number of Moroccan citizens leaping at a chance of illegally crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in the pursuit of even a slightest "charm of luck" critiques the neo-liberal ideas of State which presents the freedom of movement itself as a crucial terrain of rule. While the influx of migrants from the other North African countries towards Europe continue to surge in numbers, the recent sway in the number of refugees and migrants from Morocco arriving in Spain by no safe and legal routes have led to an increased militarization and strategic aggressiveness on their borders as part of repressive state apparatus. The deplorable living conditions of refugees and migrants, reduced to 'bare life', make us question the 'laws of hospitality' of both the host countries. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), a collection of short stories by Moroccan-American author Laila Lalami, identifies the desperation of Moroccan youth and captures their multifaceted migratory experience across their stratified, postcolonial society through the lives of four young Moroccan immigrants who hope to seek a better life in Spain by crossing the Strait of Gibraltar on a lifeboat. Drawing from the colonial wound of the postcolonial nation of Africa, Lalami's book dispels any unjustified homogenisation of its Moroccan community by contrasting its economic precarity, social invisibility, conflicting "Muslim" identity and gender normativity through the characters who reject the traditional, stereotyped performance of a Third-World immigrant. However, this paper seeks to investigate such a pluralized, free community whose individuals do not appropriate their

differences, but allow their cultural positioning to contextualise their migratory experiences and precariat living within the contemporary social discourse particularly through the lens of gender. For this purpose, the paper draws upon Roberto Esposito's ideas of a community, and follows Foucault, Derrida, Agamben, Butler and Hall in their critique of State (Morocco and Spain) and their unequal power structures that reconfigure gender performativity amid crisis, all the while exemplifying through the stories the constructs of how discrimination against the migrant 'other' is embedded, operated and legitimised in the West.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, African Diaspora, Gender, Resistance, Vulnerability

Introduction

The spiralling fear of 'aliens', 'foreigners', 'guests' or 'outsiders', as maintained by Derrida, underlies the phenomenon of conditional hospitality wherein the 'host' retaining the mastery of the house intends to extend only a limited hospitable act towards the new arrivals. The status of the 'outsider' as a guest or a parasite is determined by the attitude of the 'host' towards them. Firstly, the hospitality should either necessitate pleasure or demand a sense of duty, and secondly, the new arrivals in order to be welcomed in the 'home' should have the benefit of the right to hospitality in the absence of which their illegitimate, parasitic status becomes liable to extermination, expulsion or arrest (Derrida 59). In considering stricter criteria of membership for 'outsiders', the modern notion of conditional hospitality embodied by major receiving societies such as the United States and Europe establish new forms of racist, religious, and ethnic prejudice to discriminate against the refugees, immigrants and asylum

seekers who come to be dependent on institutional generosity. This paper extrapolates on the ramifications entailed by the breakdown of hospitality thresholds reducing the status of 'guests' to 'parasites' as witnessed in the case of Spain, a country located in Southwestern Europe spanning across the Ionian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. As of 2023, a report from National Statistics Institute of Spain (INE) states that of the total number of immigrants in Spain from abroad, 87.8% were foreign nationals out of which the arrivals of Moroccans (123,468) form the second major nationality of foreign immigrants after Colombians (170,722) (4). Taking note of this figure, this paper critiques the neo-liberal ideas of State which presents the freedom of movement itself as a crucial terrain of precariat living studied particularly through the theoretical lens of gender and migration studies. For this purpose, I aim to analyse *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), a collection of short stories by Moroccan-American author Laila Lalami which identifies the desperation of Moroccan youth and captures their multifaceted migratory experience across their stratified, postcolonial society through the lives of four Moroccan immigrants - Murad, Aziz, Halima and Faten - who hope to seek a better life moving from Casablanca and Tangier to Spain by crossing the Strait of Gibraltar on a perilous lifeboat.

The heavy influx of migrants from an ex-colony such as Africa into Spain draws our critical attention towards the historical and cultural ties that bind both the countries together since the early nineteenth century. The colonial discourse of white, European masters which once essentialized the colonized into rigid categories of race, gender, and class created an ambivalent struggle within the colonized the vestiges of which continue to define their lived experiences and complicate the contemporary relationship between both the former colonized and colonizer precisely through the phenomenon of increased

migration. As Paul Gilroy rightly claims in *Postcolonial Melancholia*: "The postcolonial migrant is rooted in the imperial past and is now here because Europe was once out there. They carry all the ambivalence of the empire with them" (89). The popular discourse which reinforces the identities of migrants using homogeneous categories such as "illegal," "sin papel," and "indocumentado" has nevertheless received alternate responses from the contemporary body of literature by African authors who unlike their predecessors - from the colonial period or the immediate years following independence - not only move away from essentializing African identity but also reject the paternalism bestowed by their colonial legacy. These new strain of African writers which include Donato Ndongo, Maximiliano Nkogo, Najat El Hachmi, Laila Lalami, Tahar Ben Jelloun and so on, who at one time have been migrants themselves, bring in the many complex intersections of migratory experiences from Africa to Spain. However, focusing on how these contemporary authors offer new and subversive visions of African masculine and feminine identities, my paper seeks to explicitly examine the heterogeneous ways in which the migratory experiences challenge the normative notions of gender and its performance for African migrants, or Moroccan migrants in particular. Through Laila Lalami's work, I aim to interrogate the normative discourse circumscribing the image of the African migrant in order to establish gender and identity in highly pluralistic and ambivalent terms.

To understand how gender as a set of social practices eventually grows into an element of power relations that shapes migration, as put forth by the esteemed migration scholar Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo in *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration,* we first need to realise that gendered bodies do not simply exist but being inscribed by many layers of assumptions and social structures are in fact

performed by subjects. Indeed, as Judith Butler maintains: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Thus, approaching the nexus of migration and gender from an urban perspective, the international migration from Tangier to Spain for the four characters of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* reflects that once different gendered identity becomes enmeshed within the new social, political, and economic worlds, they will lie inevitably altered along with their imagined expectations of the host country. Contextualising this relational change in Moroccan masculinity and femininity as ambivalent, Stuart Hall in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) aptly states that identity "is something that happens over time, that is never stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference" (222). Lalami's novel inverting the traditional linear narrative opens medias res to reveal only partially the gendered burden motivating their overnight journey across the Strait of Gibraltar. The image of the Spanish coastline glistening "like tombstones in a dark cemetery" (Lalami 5) itself invokes Agamben's concept of the state of exception, a space in which "anything is possible"; where the residents are stripped of all legal and political status and protection, and putting-to-death becomes the "primary foundation" of political power (95-99). Within such a space presupposed by a hierarchization of life itself, the lives of the Moroccan immigrants are reduced only to "pure" or "bare life". The bodies in the bag, the source of abject horror which Murad stumbles upon reaching the coast for the first time (Lalami 13) itself exposes the differential politics of protection in the age of biopolitics. Lalami consciously reminds the readers that the pursuit of this hope thrives on the rich cultural memory of the quest once undertaken by the then powerful Moor army across the Straits in 711, but now as an ironic tryst of fate, embodying

the colonial wound "a motley mix of people from the ex-colonies, without guns or armor, without a charismatic leader" (Lalami 6) dreams of making it to the Spanish shore at the risk of their lives for securing a better world of opportunities. For a similar reason, Murad, the first born male child divested of his status as the "patriarch of the house" due to his more successful younger siblings, continues to harbour the hope of returning to Spain to try his luck.

Understanding the Role of Hegemonic Masculinity

Contextualising the everyday experiences of marginality and access to different segments of the labour market within the contemporary Morocco, Lalami's book points out that the country's high unemployment rate discourages even the urban, English-speaking, talented youth, such as Murad, to find meaningful, stable employment through his educational accomplishments and other tangible skills: "Looking back now, he wondered if he should have worked with smugglers, bringing in tax-free goods from Ceuta, instead of wasting his time at the university" (Lalami 61). When he's forced to work as a tour guide in Tangier while his younger brothers study medicine in Rabat and the younger sister, Lamya, despite being a woman, works as a receptionist for an import export firm and ardently takes her own life decisions, Murad starts to feel inadequate in his role of, what R.W. Connell terms hegemonic masculinity. To situate the changing gender dynamics within the contemporary, socio-economic reality of Morocco, it might be helpful to discuss the 2003 announcement by King Mohammad IV to reform the country's *moudawana* or personal status code, dedicated towards women empowerment by viewing men and women on an egalitarian level. This renders men in no longer a privileged

position to dominate a family and restrict the mobility of the female. Accordingly, Murad's economic dependence on his mother and other gender relations threatening his male authority of a 'breadwinner' propel him to decide in favour of migration: "He knew, in his heart, that if only he could get a job, he would make it, he would be successful, like his sister was today, like his younger brothers would be someday. His mother wouldn't dream of discounting his opinion the way she did" (Lalami 108). His blindsided, aspirational daydreamings for Spain were also reinforced by the success stories of other male migrants in the neighbourhood, like that of Rashid's brother, which imbibes successful migration specifically as a positive reinforcement of masculinity into him.

However, after Murad's failed attempt to make it to Spain, his deflated masculinity makes him question his own gendered identity and its implications. He shunned his societal exchanges and stayed home with his mother. He realises that his definition of manhood was only restricted to being the archetypal male provider while Spain represented the unattainable possibility of achieving that status: "He'd been so consumed with his imagined future that he hadn't noticed how it had started to overtake something inside him, bit by bit" (Lalami 103). Additionally, it is also interesting to note here Foucault's insight into "a culture of danger" (66) that neoliberalism perpetuates, that is, a kind of biopolitics compelling a neoliberal subject to become an "entrepreneur of himself" (145). In other words, every individual, irrespective of gender, at the face of risk and responsibility adopts an appropriate conduct to face the "dynamic of competition" (Foucault 147). This implies that the vulnerable subject rather favours adaptation over subversion. Consequently, after a failed experience to fend for himself on European soil, Murad's return is marked by a shift in his identity, specifically a gendered one. This readjustment of masculinity can be well

put in R.W. Connell's words: "[Masculinities] come into existence as people act.... They are created in specific historical circumstances and, as those circumstances change, the gender practices can be contested and reconstructed" (12-13). His acceptance comes with the knowledge that just as the old stories handed down to him by his father could be remembered only in fragments, and in the present moment needs to be substituted by an active construction of his own, his identity, like his memory, also demands a construction through alternative ideas of masculinity. Along the same lines, precarious employment settings and broader structures of power and inequality that govern gender relations also play a constitutive role in Aziz's decision making process. Assuming a subordinate role to his wife, Aziz's sense of inferiority in the household is exacerbated when he learns that his young wife, Zohra, finds a job at a soda factory while he remains unemployed. The fantasy for a better lifestyle and working conditions that can potentially empower his manhood convinces him to migrate temporarily away from his family against their common wishes. While the husband and wife adjust to a negotiable division of labour in the household after his migration, Zohra's role as the loyal, earning wife and caregiver of his mother produces a disproportionate imbalance in the relationship, thereby, still giving Aziz a final authority over their marriage. When expecting the same sense of entitlement in his role as a migrant, he finds the particular habitus failing to gratify his manhood as western bias renders him with an alleged second-class citizenship and a compromised masculinity. This reflects how border crossing involves a fluid and performative identity for the same individual experiencing and enacting "marginalisation, oppression or privilege" in varying degrees in different settings across their everyday life (Mattis et al. 419):

> *He didn't talk about the time when he was in El Corte Ingles shopping for a jacket and the guard followed him around as if he were a criminal. He didn't describe how, at the grocery store, cashiers greeted customers with hellos and thank yous, but their eyes always gazed past him as though he were invisible, nor did he mention the constant identity checks that the police had performed these last two years. (Lalami 91)*

Migratory Circuits and Shifts in Gender Relations

Upon Aziz's arrival on Moroccan soil after five years, Lalami brilliantly highlights how in order to escape the exclusion and marginality that his precarious migrant position offers, Aziz, in fact, integrates himself too much with the society of the Other and abandons his masculine social position in Morocco. In other words, the Spanish hospitality had forced his 'guest' to transform his 'otherness' and cease to be himself. As a result, the migratory circuit shifts Aziz's priorities, the desire for uninhibited sexual pleasure and independence captivates him and leaves him empty in his relationship with Zohra: "He looked around. Something struck him as odd, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it. It wasn't until the waiter came back with his coffee that he realized there were no women at all" (Lalami 96). Aziz loses his interest in performing the traditional model of Moroccan masculinity, and instead of committing to his family, he embarks on the dangerous pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. Nevertheless, he continues to impress Zohra and his in-laws with elaborate gifts from Spain to present his masculine act of migration as a successful one even though his time in Spain bruised his manhood with bouts of racism and hardships. However, the return home is an

opportunity for the migrant to not only be a man again, but become a mythical figure to other aspiring migrants. The widening chasm that migration creates between Aziz and Zohra is portrayed as not being impactful enough to manipulate Zohra's sense of autonomy in her marriage. In reinforcing her commitment against migration, she breaks from the subservient and docile model of the Moroccan female, asserting her own desires and lifestyle to live as an urban, independent Moroccan woman. Ultimately, Lalami attributes immigration experiences to women, whether internal or external, as an opportunity for self-development and independence as viewed in the case of Halima, a young mother of three children and persistent breadwinner of the family who constantly puts up with her abusive husband, Maati. As Halima rejects her mother's conservative advice to be patient with Maati, "A woman must know how to handle her husband" (Lalami 53), by insisting for a divorce from him, Lalami dispels the idea of home as an idealized location for married women since strong social relations and socio-cultural norms regulate their lives, prescribing gender roles deemed fit to cater only the patriarchal institution of marriage. In contrast, Halima revolts against the physical and economic marginalisation in her marriage by even bribing the judge to grant her a divorce before she finally resolves to migrate to Spain. She hopes that the promise of a comparatively liberal potential of a foreign land, and the restructured kinship and community networks might work to reduce the stigmas associated with a divorced woman.

The limited possibilities extended by the labour market for the performance of traditional breadwinner masculine identities find other substituting ways of performing masculinity such as alcohol, violence and substance abuse, so just like Murad and Aziz, Maati, who is unable to maintain steady employment and feels disempowered in his masculinity subscribes to

increased aggressive behavior and abuse towards Halima. However, relinquishing her identity as a victim, Halima embodies a new generation of Moroccan women who have had to reinvent themselves against the toxic male hegemony of their marriage. Blurring the assumed gender roles, Halima takes the destiny of her family in her own hands and displays an astounding sense of autonomy when she decides that it's time to stand up against the abuse. However, her failure to get a divorce due to the corrupt judiciary reflects the inability of the country's *moudawana* to secure women's rights in contemporary Morocco. Still determined in her pursuit, Halima eventually decides to migrate with her children but the unsuccessful journey across the Straits brings her back again to the same stubborn destiny. But her indefatigable struggle to change her life finally makes Maati comply in granting her a divorce and she soon begins her life as a single woman in Morocco. Upon her return, Halima builds a distance with her kin, including her mother, which makes her realise her own ability and increased freedom to take worthy life decisions. Unlike her mother, she remains unbothered by any stigma attached to being a divorcée. In the book, Halima and Zohra thus evolve as a representation of the changing face of womanhood in contemporary Morocco who seek independence and control in their lives. The precarious act of migration constitutive in their decision-making process indeed helped propagate more egalitarian gender roles shaping their alternate models of empowered femininity - a momentous change the West is yet to grapple with when imagining the Third-World women immigrants.

Minority Experiences and Culture of Resistance

Another female character in the book is Faten, a radical student member of Islamic Student Organization, outspoken in her critique of the corrupt King Hassan's government and against the prevalent influence of the West over Morocco such that it renders her as a potential rebel before an influential bureaucrat, Larbi. When the "conservative" dressing and pressing religious dogma of this nineteen year-old Moroccan female - "'But if we had been better Muslims, perhaps these problems wouldn't have been visited on our nation and on our brethren elsewhere'" (Lalami 18) - begin radicalising his own daughter, Noura, the power relations resulting from the distinct classes and ideological positioning of old and new Moroccan communities come to the surface. Larbi, who opted for an assimilationist strategy with the West considers the idea of her daughter in a headscarf as a provoking strategy embodied by militant Muslims while for Faten, it represents the opposing characteristics of rebellion - a claim for more vocal Muslim solidarity and socio-economic equality. However, after having failed her college entrance exam, Faten realizes the futility in challenging the largely corrupt system, especially as a female who is now left insecure in her career options, forced to compete for jobs without the necessary credentials just like a major Moroccan population. Realising how a pre-existing assimilationist line of conduct forces her exclusion from her own land and culture as a minority, Faten decides to migrate illegally to Spain in search of hope for a better future. The new experiences of migration however completely reconfigures her gender identity, beliefs and selfhood:

> *She stared at the ceiling for a while and then turned to look at her nightstand, where a pocket-*

> *size edition of the Qur'an lay, a thin film of dust over it. She remembered her college days, when she'd decided to wear the hijab and preached to every woman she met that she should do the same. How foolish she had been. She thought about her best friend, Noura, back in Rabat, and wondered what had happened to her, whether she'd kept the hijab or whether, like Faten, she'd taken it off. Noura was probably still wearing it. She was rich; she had the luxury of having faith. But then, Faten thought, Noura also had the luxury of having no faith…That was the thing with money. It gave you choices. (Lalami 81)*

For most immigrant women, favourable perceptions about the receiving society do not necessarily translate into feeling confident about finding new meanings of life. There exists layered silence around articulating their sense of hopelessness, their alienation from mainstream society, their invisibility to socio-economic infrastructures, their ambivalence towards 'going back' or 'staying,' and their uncertainty about their lives. As all of these realities become part of their quotidian, the promised land can ultimately prove to be just a myth often pushing the immigrant to reminisce what has been lost through the dialectics of remembering, forgetting and forgiving: "…she feared it would bring back memories of her own college life back in Morocco and she didn't want to think of that time in her life, when the world still seemed full of promise and possibility" (Lalami 75). In Morocco, religiosity and purity were a constructive tool for her belonging but upon reaching the foreign land without any social aid, she realizes that the only asset at her disposal is her body. Thus, unlike her counterparts, Faten capitalizes on her sexuality to avoid deportation, "She didn't need to speak Spanish to understand that he'd wanted to make her a deal.

She remembered what her imam had said back at the underground mosque in Rabat — that extreme times sometimes demanded extreme measures" (Lalami 83). Her decision to sexually engage with the Spanish guard demonstrates how dynamics of gender makes the migratory experiences unfavourably distributed. Faten, who once overtly opposed the system that objectified women and benefitted from their sexuality, is now compelled to sell her body to fend for herself. While in Spain, she's no longer constrained by the same patriarchal authority that permeates Moroccan society, she nevertheless could not escape the oppressive gender relations which now directly exploit her as a prostitute and demand sexual favours from her either in exchange of freedom, or on the false assurance of freedom. Thereafter, Lalami's portrayal of Faten as a migrant sex worker becomes central in locating the body politic and Western gaze othering the bodies with the assumptions and values of the privileged (white male) group holding the most influence in a society. Such a gaze, as Donna Haraway notes in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), holds others accountable and (mis)represents them but can prove relatively lenient in performing accountability towards the dominant group whose bodies and actions are rendered much less visible and prone to judgement in the process (188). This is particularly experienced in Faten's liaison with a young Spaniard named Martín who constantly orientalizes her skin, body and origins thus privileging his own position:

> *Women in this country, he said, shaking his head. 'They don't know how to treat a man. Not the way you Arab girls do.' Faten felt anger well up in her. She wanted to slap him. 'I've been reading up,' he said. 'About the duties of the woman to the man and all that. It's a fascinating subject'. (Lalami 83-84)*

In Martin's eyes, Faten must perform the role of the sensual and subservient Moroccan woman that has been constructed by public discourse. Beneath his chivalrous veneer fabricating a false concern for her future lies the vestiges of a colonial desire and racial supremacy that he had imbibed from his European predecessors: "'I like the smell of your skin-salty like black olives.' He coiled a strand of her hair around his finger, let it spring out, ran his fingers along her cheekbones, cupped her right breast. 'And your breasts-ripe like mangoes'" (Lalami 131). Precipitated through his desperate act of sexualisation, Faten's exotic body stimulates Martin's unlimited desire for the knowledge of the other, achieved at the blatant ignorance of his "frightening self-discovery" (Said 188) itself for even Martin's Spanish roots were considered contestable. Further, the obsession with her physical attributes runs so strong in him that it not only leads him to lose interest in courting Spanish women but also allows his inherited structural racism and patriarchy to make a de facto claim on Faten's entire being and consciousness: "He gave her a look that made her feel he didn't believe her, then continued talking, as though her acquiescence wasn't required when it came to the matter of helping her, because he knew what was better for her" (Lalami 84). Whether the migratory experience had transformative potential for her or not might remain unsettled but despite carving a precariat life, Faten boldly refuses to adhere to any imposed performativity and asserts her agency by rejecting her categorised otherness, hence challenging a traditional system of power and control.

Conclusion

Laila Lalami in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* thus effectively reconfigures the normative gender roles and presents her characters embodying rebellious forms of African masculinity and femininity that challenge the Western lens of

viewing victimhood and agency in relation to the Third-World immigrants. As all the four protagonists try to reconcile their personal desires with their migratory experiences, the reality of their journey gives a potent shock to their understanding of who they are and how Morocco and Spain as diasporic spaces transform their individuality. Although the journey of Lalami's characters as a singular Moroccan community destabilizes any static and homogeneous notion of gender, identity, and the nation, in her stories, there emerges diasporic solidarities translating the pursuit of freedom as a larger expression of hope, existence and common growth that bring separate individuals together. This brings us closer to the affirmative biopolitics of Roberto Esposito who deconstructs every notion of proper in tracing freedom as a "locus of plurality, difference, and alterity" rather than as "locus of identity, belonging, and appropriation" (55). For him, "freedom is the singular dimension of community" that "sweeps across infinite singularities that *are* plural" (Esposito 55). Possible only in an open and free model of community that internalizes its exteriority but remains open to difference, Laila Lalami through the Moroccon subjectivities in question here conceives the possibility of contemporary political sensibilities underpinned no more by the hegemony of the proper. Hence, the need arises for a new political positioning towards the 'others' delimited by the binary between 'us' and 'them'. It is as Derrida suggests, being open and accepting the 'other' on their terms might open new experiences for the host and embolden the possibility of greater recognition for the guest.

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