

Arab American Diaspora: Issues of Immigrants in 'The Other Americans' by Laila Lalami

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of diasporic elements in the novels of Laila Lalami, exploring various ways in which she depicts the effects of migration, searching for home, belonging and the struggle to assimilate into the new communities. Additionally, it explores the challenges faced by Arab immigrants to adopt in their host countries. It discusses the experiences of characters, in 'The Other American' as an example of diasporic narrative. The analysis also focus on issues of migration in the novel. The paper examines the life of immigrants in the light of immigrant sensibility from a perspective of the protagonist, Nora. The novel delves into the lives of Arab American immigrants as they experience diaspora.

Keywords: Arab American, Diaspora, Migration, Identity Crisis, Displacement.

Arab American Diaspora

Arab-American literature started around early twentieth century and show cases wide array of the works of novelists, memoirists, poets and playwrights. Arab-American identity has been in the making since Arabic speaking immigrants began to arrive in the U.S. in 1870s. Arabs in the U.S. are officially categorized as whites. Arab-Americans history is the old and their ethnicity is uncertain so they have attracted visibility in the U.S. Arab Americans after 9/11 have been under the to strict scrutiny in the U.S. There is an increased number of hostilities in different from like religious and cultural discrimination and hate crimes and racial biases as well. The major themes that are reflected in Arab American diaspora are nostalgia, memory, loss, displacement, return, racial discrimination, issues of migration. All these themes are relevant in Laila Lalami's works.

Introduction to the Author

Laila Lalami is an Arab American writer. She is originally from Morocco, and in 1992 she relocated to the USA and completed her doctorate in linguistic from the University of Southern California. At present she is serving as a

associate professor of creative writing there. Lalami is known is for her fiction works: Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, Secret Son, The Moor's Account, and The Other Americans. She was honored with American Book Award, Arab American Book and Hurston Wright Legacy Award for her novel The Moor's Account. Additionally, it was finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, long-listed for the Man Booker Prize.

The Other Americans

"The Other Americans" by Laila Lalami stands as a profound exploration of the diasporic experience, elegantly interweaving the lives of characters tethered between their inherited cultural identities and the societal backdrop of contemporary America. As a diasporic novel, it delves into the complex tapestry of immigration, assimilation, and enduring ripples of geopolitical events. Through its multifaceted narrative, Lalami not only examines the individual journeys of her characters but also holds a mirror to the larger Arab-American community grappling with the shadows of 9/11. This literary piece transcends typical narratives, illustrating not only the challenges faced by immigrants and their descendants but also the nuanced ways in which they navigate, and are implicated in, the

wider socio-political landscape of their adopted homeland Lalami in her novel, *The Other American*, depicts the story of immigrant family from Morocco to America.

The plot revolves around the Nora Guerraoui, a music composer. She is helping the police investigating the case of her father, Driss Guerraoui's accident, which is suspected to be a hit and run case. Nora learns through a sheriff, that her father has met with an accident and she driving home panicking, as the passage shows her plight,

My father was killed on a spring night four years ago, while I sat in the corner booth of a new bistro in Oakland. Whenever I think about that moment, these two contradictory images come to me: my father struggling for breath on the cracked asphalt, and me drinking champagne with my roommate, Margo. [...] But I do remember driving home on the freeway, in the foggy darkness that cloaked almond groves and orange orchards, all the while dreaming up alternate explanations: perhaps the sheriff's department had misidentified the body, or the hospital had swapped my father's records with someone else's. These possibilities were far-fetched, I knew, and yet I clung to them as I drove. (*The Other American* p.1)

Diaporic experiences

Driss Guerraoui along with wife, Mariyam Guerraoui had migrated to America in 1970's. The couple started their family here, they had two daughter Salma (elder) and Nora (younger). Driss was training to become a professor of philosophy but turn to be a baker here. He starts a bakery called Aladdin Donuts taking a loan from his brother.

Salma is dentist and married to an Arab American dentist both own clinic and practice dentistry. The had two beautiful kids. Nora on other ventured into music and became a singer, which her mother never supported but her dad had his admiration and support for her unconventional choices. This all seems to be good and is sign of immigrant success and other words this an American Dream where children have better future than their parents.

The racial discrimination and hostility faced by Moroccan immigrant families shows their perilous condition on belonging in America. When Nora was in school, she

faced a lot of discrimination and is considered as 'other', while in school because of her food traditions. When Nora eats zaalouk, an eggplant dish from her lunchbox, one classmate tease her by saying that "it looks like poop" (18). When she is unable to properly recognize the nursery rhyme "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," she is classified for her lacking awareness about popular culture in America and it also considered as learning disability by her teacher. Nora's is unable to adjust socially, which brings her remarks like "severe mutism" and "social anxiety" in her progress report.. Her best friend is Sonya Mukherji from Indian Hindu family coming from totally distinct cultural, traditional and religious background their friendship formed out the shared experienced as immigrants.

Muslims before 9/11 were perceived to be savage, barbarous and rude. Post 9/11 the scenario completely changed as the hate crimes and violence against immigrants in general and Muslims particular began, Nora remembers:

"Then in September of our sophomore years, two planes were flown into the World Trade Center and strangely that distinction seemed to matter less, not more. We were both called the same names. Ragheads. Talibans. Sometimes raghead talibans" (*The Other Americans* 91–92).

The experience of racism and hostility are prevalent in the novel, especially after 9/11. Driss and his family are subjected to violence both verbally and physically. Driss Guerraoui's first ever business in America was , Aladdin Donuts, which was set a blaze, and Driss and Nora stood staring helplessly at it burnt, "burning like a stack of hay" (36). They were not in the position to save the donut shop. The investigation reports that the fire initiated with a homemade contraption of a "brick wrapped in a rag that had been doused in accelerant" (*The Other Americans* p.36).

This deeply traumatized Guerraoui family, especially Driss because he seen this in Casablanca his home time. And escaped to America and now is not in the position of to go back.

Nora's dating experience with the white men is never fulfilling. She is excited when her junior show interest in her, Buckett Burke is sophisticated, worldly, well-traveled,

and comfortable. But later he shows interests other women. She experienced a few heart breaking moments with other men as well. Women of color are considered desirable for romance and less desirable for a marriage prospect. Nora is fighting for the justice for her father. Where she finds herself crippled when the culprit is pretending to be innocent. As law abiding citizen and it was a unfortunate mistake . She notices that American law system has lot of loop holes, and narrates,

"The jury would be hearing two stories about what happened on the night of April 28, one told by the prosecutor and one told by the defense attorney. It didn't really matter which one was true, it only mattered which one the jury found more convincing" (The Other American p.163).

Nora ruminates over her failure to bring justice to her father after Baker's release, her despair can be noticed here: ' But if the roles had been reversed and...Mohammed Driss Guerraoui had killed a man he'd been fighting with for many years, would he have been charged only with a count of hit-and-run....Growing up in this town, I had long ago learned that the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven.' (The Other Americans p.164–65)

Identity Crisis

Salma Guerraoui, is the eldest daughter. She migrated to America at an early age. She displays the pictures of an ideal daughter is Eastern context. She completed her education, studied dentistry and married an Arab American doctor, who migrated from Syria. And also mother of the twins. Her picture perfect life has the other side, where Salma is unhappy. Lalami explains how immigration comes set of challenges as Salma goes through the special burden and blessing at the same time being an Arab American. As she states,

'Immigration was a decision taken by her parents; she was put in a position where she needed to restart a new life in a totally different place and culture and cope up with it; she says, "all what you had to do was take the plane.' (The Other Americans p.194)

Nora also has similar experience of ambivalence. She is youngest daughter of Guerraoui family. Nora was born

and raised in America, she lived her life with clear difference between culture of origin and culture of host-land and between prejudice and reality. She has great fondness for America and also resents it for all the subjugation, racism and stereotypes she has to face. Nora was bullied at her school for being different and having strange food habits. Even her name was also not pronounced correctly. She the passage shows,

'What an unusual name. Where are you from? At recess, the kids formed out and gathered again in small groups-military kids, church kids, and trailer-park kids, hippie kids- groups in which I knew no one and no one knew me '(The Other Americans p.17)

Nora was called 'ragged head' 'Talibani' and 'poop eater'. she has no friends in the school and only friend she had was an Indian girl, Soniya Mukherji. This friendship was based on the similar shared experiences. As says,

"By time I started the first grade, I had one friend" (19). Nora lives are life feeling inferior and which gets intense as she grows "Yet, the sense of being different never completely went away" (The Other Americans p. 20).

Displacement

Displacement is evident in Laila Lalami in 'The Other American' which portrays displacement in various forms, encompassing not only geographical movements but also emotional and cultural disconnection. The novel delves into the immigrant life where characters are navigating in their lives in a country which is not their place of origin while reconciling with different identities. This can be explored through the character of Driss, the novel centers around his death and bringing him justice.

Driss is an immigrant from Morocco, has built a life in America. Despite of his efforts to blend in and his apparent success of restaurant business, he remains an 'other' within his community. This subtle form of displacement is emblematic experience of immigrant life; it encompasses emotion of isolation and challenge of straddling two worlds. The one the left behind and the new one where immigrants must establish themselves a new.

The tragic death of Driss,in a hit-and-run accident, suspected to be racially motivated, elevates the themes of racial tensions and the vulnerabilities that immigrants face. His displacement is further explored posthumously as his

death brings to light the complexities of his life, his relationships, and the interweaving of personal and cultural identities. His displacement depicts the plight of immigrant both personally and collectively in America as 'others'.

The concept of 'othering' is explored through out the novel. Which can be observed in the title of the novel, that emphasis on the 'other' is about the Americans living on the margins; their existence seems less significant compared to that of 'real' first-class citizens. Similarly, the deliberate choice to lowercase the initial letters in the title emphasizes this lower and marginalized status placed upon some other Americans. Thus the plot of the novel, depicts marginalization as prominent issue which arises from dominant white identity. This 'othering' and marginalization leads character to experience physical and emotional displacement. Anderson and his son Anderson Junior are portrayed as chief character in this process of 'othering' since they consider themselves as 'legitimate' owners of America while others are viewed as subordinates or unwanted individuals. As Anderson claims,

"Some people say I should be grateful for the business that the newcomers are bringing to the town, but the way I see it, they're changing this place and wanting me to be grateful for it. They didn't ask if we wanted them there, they just came". (The Other Americans p.68)

Driss had established his own business, and started a bakery called Aladin Donuts, which represents not his livelihood but also his attempt to weave himself into the fabric of his adopted American community. The act of arson in the novel reveals the aftermaths of 9/11, a traumatic impact which Arab Muslims have to endure. The novel examines the diverse response which is manifested in the of burning down of Aladin Donuts, which is described in the as,

"We turned onto Kickapoo Trail to find Aladdin Donuts burning like a stack of hay. In a single motion, my father jumped out of the station wagon and pulled out his cell phone, just as Mr. Melendez at the 7-Eleven across the street came running toward us. "I called 911," he said. "He told us he'd been changing the paper in his cash register when he heard the sound of screeching tires. He'd thought nothing of it until the smell of smoke came drifting in

through the doorway, a mix of gasoline, ash, melting plastic, and caramelizing syrup" (The Other Americans p. 78)

Driss has immigrated to America to escape a political turmoil in Morocco. So always wanted to in America his intimidation toward the deportation is quite obvious. After the his first business was arsoned, he muster the courage to start a fresh with new venture called 'Diner'. His desire to assimilate into the host culture and to be a good one with main stream can be testified as Nora narrates,

"he put up a huge flag outside his restaurant, like he had to prove he was one of the good ones. I told him over and over that he should sell. But he refused, he loved it here. God only knows why" (The Other Americans p.56).

Driss's failure is in the deliberate choices he makes to assimilate and validate himself and his family as the good one. His strong alignment towards the host country is because of the threat of deportation and to live in America. This is how Lalami depicts the character of a fallen tragic hero. However, Nora determination to seek justice for her father is revealed, when Efrain, chooses not to testify as the eye witness of the hit and run accident because of his undocumented immigrant status. Eventually Nora persuades him to come forward and provide testimony and the justice the delivered.

Conclusion

'The Other American' as a novel focuses on issues faced by its characters in the light of migration. Driss the central character in the novel, around whose death the whole story revolves. He moved to America from Morocco to escape from the violence only to face it again in America. From burning of his bakery, 'Aladin Donuts' to his accident depicts the life of turmoil endured by the immigrants. Noura on other hand who is set to seek justice for her father, had to suffer to get it as her father was a Muslim man and his savagery is evident because of racism faced by the Arabs in America. Lalami deliberately creates the life of immigrants after 9/11 to show the increased amount hate crimes towards immigrants in general and Arabs in particular.

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