



Surviving the Sense of the Arab Family in the West: The Arab Moroccan Immigrant Family in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* as a Case Study

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Abstract— *The sense of the Arab family as a social and cultural construct in Western societies is doomed to fluctuation and ongoing metamorphosis due to the new circumstances dictated and crafted by Western culture. The latter's fierce pressure exerted on Arab immigrant families subverts these families' identity and culture from within. One manifestation, among others, of such subversion is the chasm that often happens between, on the one hand, first-generation Arab immigrants, and second and third-generation immigrants, on the other. This paper explores this often-overwhelming relationship between these immigrants. Also, it showcases the types of pressure that Western hegemony (through its culture and civilization) employs to culturally 'tame' the Arab family. This paper follows textual and discourse analysis methods to critically read Laila Lalami's novel, *The Other Americans* (2019), principally through the characters of Maryam Guerraoui and her daughters, Nora and Salma. Would – or would not— the Arab family 'go Western' is, thus, the pivotal concern of this paper. This paper shows that it is normal for Arab families to receive pressure from Western mainstream culture, yet it is abnormal not to resist such pressure to maintain the sense of the Arab family.*



Keywords— *Arab immigrant family, cultural identity, hegemony.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The alienation that immigrants receive from hegemonic mainstream culture in their adoptive countries is likely to exert excessive pressure on their cultural identity. Such pressure leads them to seek ways to stay resilient to the impact of repercussions of that pressure on their identity. One way to maintain such resiliency is establishing a sense of family among diasporic immigrants. This article mainly focuses on the sense of family Arab immigrants tend to construct as a shield against the tension coming from mainstream culture.

To embark on this exploration, this essay uses Laila Lalami's deftly written novel, *The Other Americans* (2019), as a springboard for a nuanced analysis of the sense of the Arab immigrant family in the West and the Moroccan immigrant family, particularly. The essay begins

with postcolonial conceptions of diaspora, migration and cultural identity regarding the concept of 'family.' It thus draws on the insights of several authors and scholars, aiming at a comprehensive understanding of how the sense of family would be maintained and, thus, operated to resist the hegemony of Western mainstream culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Maintaining a sense of family in diasporic communities is crucial to cultural identity preservation in immigrants' receiving countries. When immigrants relocate to new lands, whether by chance or by force, they become exposed to drastically different realities. The different geography and culture they encounter in their adoptive countries exert intensive pressure on the essence of their

identity, culture and religion. Laxmiprasad (2020) argues in the context of the hegemony the receiving culture has on immigrants that “[t]he diasporic communities might choose adoption, accommodation, acculturation, and assimilation. Identity crisis arises if one migrates from one territory to another place” (p. 99). Immigrants’ gatherings, therefore, would be an efficient strategy to respond to the identity crisis imposed by the cultural hegemony on the part of the receiving culture. One paramount form of these gatherings is the family.

Mähönen et al. (2013) mention that immigrants’ satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – in their adoptive countries is tightly related to whether or not their expectations are met in these new territories. They explain that the greater the congruence level between immigrants’ expectations before immigration and after, the better their well-being. However, that congruence level is rhizomatic and never predictable, given the shapeless and non-linear realities that these immigrants witness in their new lands. Within these tense circumstances, it is paramount for immigrants to achieve a sense of community/family to strengthen the cultural ‘front’ within. “Community denotes both a social/organizational formation and a feeling of cohesion” (Grossman, 2019, p. 8). It is this cohesion and strength *within* which would help immigrants resist the host culture’s hegemony and temptations. However, attaining that feeling of belonging and collective connection inside a diasporic community does not always succeed given that some communities are merely imagined (Grossman, 2019). Some diasporic immigrants may share a sense of community, yet through different political *imagined* tendencies. This community is *imagined* “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (cited in Anderson, 2016, p. 6). Such communities, according to Grossman (2019) may take the form of “political lobbies and advocacy groups, religious associations, cultural and educational programmes, social clubs, self-defense organizations, hometown societies, fundraising bodies, and youth movements” (p. 8). Immigrants tend to function within these bodies based on their various inclinations. However, worth mentioning is that working within these organizational bodies does not always have ideal consequences due to the intra-structural problems they may carry. In this vein, Levitt contends that “such communities are not always that idyllic; they might also reproduce and perpetuate power hierarchies and inequalities imported from the homeland into the host country” (cited in Grossman, 2019, p. 8). Therefore, according to Grossman (2019), only minorities usually

work for the success of these organizational bodies of diasporic communities.

The position of the family in these communities is crucial. The diasporic family in general and the Arab immigrant family in particular have witnessed a dearth of research in cultural studies, sociology and ethnography. Unlike the diaspora situation, which has been amply researched (e.g. Brubaker, 2005; Butler, 2001; Chander, 2001; Hall, 2015; Klich & Lesser, 1998; Laxmiprasad, 2020; Tölölyan, 2012; etc.), the purpose of this paper is to explore the sense of family in the Arab diaspora situation. According to Nagel et al. (2004) “[t]he position of Arabness in American society has become all the more problematic in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC in September 2001” (p. 12). Cultural censorship on the part of Western receiving countries has exponentially increased to control Arab immigrants’ flow into these countries as well as their cultural resistance to fully assimilating into the host cultures. During the aftermath of these attacks, harsh criticism was addressed to American policies and laws of migration. Undoubtedly, these laws and policies have had a strong impact on Arab families in terms of their way of life in America as well as their encounter with its people’s mainstream culture. In this context, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009) argue that “[l]ife in diaspora poses many challenges and immigrants have to strategize, negotiate, adjust, and compromise in order to mitigate/minimize potential conflicts with secular time, work schedules, legal and other constraints” (p. 258). Several scholars agree that whatever the host countries do to control, ‘tame,’ marginalize, or disregard cultural minorities within, they will never succeed in effacing their identity altogether. Chander (2001), for instance, posits that “[t]he creation of identity is not a zero-sum game, with the addition of one culture requiring the deletion of another” (p. 1053). Diasporic immigrants cannot sever their new realities from their homelands’ culture, identity and religion once and for all. In this vein, Chander (2001) opines that “[t]he hallmarks of a globalized world are hybridity, intermingling, and multiple allegiances; but despite this intermingling, most people have not sloughed off their nationalist skin in favour of an evolved cosmopolitanism” (p. 1049). Therefore, in seeking to make a new ‘home’ in diasporic countries, strengthening the immigrant self is crucial to resisting the unequal cultural conflicts within the encounter zone with the Westerners. For Laxmiprasad (2020), empowering the self is paramount to respond to the tension received from mainstream culture. He states that the “[s]elf is constituted through the multiple pasts co-existing in the present” (p. 104). Such co-existence of the past manifested in the

present is undoubtedly open to cultural and hegemonic infiltrations on the part of mainstream culture. In the same context, Laxmiprasad (2020) elaborates that “[t]he ‘self’ develops after the act of dislocation and it relates to the new environment as it negotiates the past, the cultural inheritance, geographical and historical memories and challenges of present” (p. 104). Immigrants’ families are, thus, a cultural construct, among others, in which immigrants take refuge to strengthen themselves.

This paper shows how Arab immigrants utilize the sense of family belonging to embolden their diasporic communities and preserve their cultural and religious identity. In what sense, thus, does religion, given its prominence in identity construction, help the Arab family in the diaspora to preserve its identity and resist the hegemony coming on the part of mainstream culture? Concurrently, Vasquez points out that “religion helps immigrants imagine their homelands in diaspora and inscribe their memories and worldviews into the physical landscape and built environment” (qtd. in Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008, p. 256). How religion is being practiced in Arab immigrants’ homelands, thus, overshadows their relationships with both Westerners and their lands. The character of Maryam in Laila Lalami’s *The Other Americans* exemplifies how religion helps solidify the cultural identity ties with the immigrant’s homeland.

1. Research Questions

The present paper aims to explore the following questions:

- 1- How does the sense of family belonging help strengthen Arab immigrants’ identity in host countries?
- 2- How does the receiving countries’ mainstream culture exert hegemony on this Arab sense of family belonging?

2. Method

To respond to this paper’s research objectives, this paper used two qualitative methods: textual analysis and critical discourse analysis. Throughout the analysis, ideas supporting the claim of this paper were evidenced by Lalami’s novel, *The Other Americans* (2019). Quotes carefully were chosen to critically expound the importance of the sense of Arab family in the diaspora to hold immigrants’ cultural identity strong. Also, the power dynamics of the hegemonic West’s discourse towards Arab and Muslim families were amply discussed to clarify the tension mainstream culture exerts on these families. The novel was approached through a postcolonial lens to account for the identity crisis immigrants forming family gatherings in the diaspora encounter in the diaspora.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For Lalami, the concept of ‘family’ is basic to the role of the diasporic intellectual in speaking for the diasporic subaltern Arab immigrants. In this vein, Alina (2013) contends that “[t]he role of the diasporic intellectual as a producer of authenticity and as the voice of subaltern consciousness (as Said expressed it) becomes thus a crucial element in exploring the politics of (post)colonial encounters” (p. 12). The Guerraoui family in Lalami’s novel inhabits a postcolonial Anglophone space of encounter between a Moroccan family and the Western Other. Lalami’s authentic representation of this family resides in recounting the fantasies, sufferings and adventures of this family’s members while seeking to fit into the Californian society. ‘Home’ for immigrants is epitomized in the family. It represents the only haven where they belong and with which they identify. Lalami stresses in her novel that Arab migrants take refuge in the family as a shield against the cultural hegemony of Western communities. She believes that the family is irreplaceable for immigrants despite the identity fluctuations they might go through due to the identity crisis resulting from their relocation to alien lands and societies. In this context, Nora says that “[t]he desert was home, however much I had tried to run away from it. Home was wide open spaces, pristine light, silence that wasn’t quite silence. Home, above all, was the family who loved me” (p. 301). In this novel, Lalami conveys that Arab immigrants remain, despite their continuous assimilation attempts, alien *immigrants* in the eyes of their adoptive communities. That is, for her, the geographical home is less important than the family itself as *home*. In this context, Laxmiprasad (2020) posits that “having home in an alien land becomes a means of suffering for them. Therefore, they see and feel the difference of living at home and abroad” (p. 99). The difference between living at home and abroad is experienced through their struggle to strike a balance between preserving the cultural identity they brought from their homelands and responding to the cultural demands of their adoptive countries. The family, hence, is the cultural and communal construct through which immigrants seek to attain this balance.

Mariam, contrary to her husband, Wajdy, and her daughters, Nora and Salma, may be considered an expatriate rather than an immigrant. Laxmiprasad (2020) makes a significant distinction between expatriates and immigrants: “[g]enerally immigrants assure themselves to be a part of their country of dwelling places whereas expatriates are temporarily located in the host country and most of the time plan to turn back to their native country,

so they never adopt the culture in the host country” (p. 100). Laxmiprasad (2020) adds that “[expatriate] means the strong feelings about the country of origin for the migrants of first generation. While for the second generation the ties and bonding with the homeland gradually gets [sic] replaced by the adopted alien country” (p. 103). Within her unstoppable struggle to keep her family together and protect it from the miscellaneous and intensive cultural infiltration of American society, she always imagines her original home country, Morocco. She never seeks to assimilate to the Californian society. “She had left her country with her family, but she still longed for everything else she hadn’t been able to bring with her” (Lalami, 2019, p. 52). Seemingly, Lalami herself is nostalgic about her home country and her family there. In this context, Driss states that “Eid fell in mid-December that year, and Maryam wanted the whole family to go to the mosque in Riverside for morning services” (Lalami, 2019, p. 57). Meanwhile, Kearney affirms that “[w]hat distinguishes diaspora people is their ongoing or re-awakened attachment and loyalty to their earlier culture and specifically to the homeland which they feel they have left” (cited in Shuval, 2000, p. 46). Beyond everything, Maryam and her husband, Driss, were forced to leave their country due to political upheavals. For Maryam, it is the family’s cultural identity which should hold the family together. This is why she always worries about her family not losing the cultural identity track. Story and Walker define cultural identity as “specific sets of characteristics, expressed in particular ways, to which both individuals and groups may subscribe in order to emphasize who they are and to distinguish themselves from others” (qtd. in Grossman, 2019). Therefore, it is through the cultural identity, which Maryam seeks to emphasize, that she stresses her difference from the Californian society. Indeed, one of the main cultural tasks of first-generation immigrants is to safeguard and bequeath the cultural identity to the next generations as pristine. Of course, given the cultural hegemony first-generation immigrants encounter in their adoptive countries, such a task would be daunting. Maryam’s guidance concerning establishing cultural ties with the homeland as well as not culturally melting in the host culture, is tilted towards Nora more than Salma. For Maryam, materialistically, Salma has a successful life. She has completed her medical studies and set up a medical practice with her husband, Tariq, who is also a doctor. She feels a special thrill whenever her mother favours her over her sister, Nora, in terms of her achievements: “[w]hy can’t you be more like Sama?” (Lalami, 2019, p. 196). She always does her best not to lose the approval of her mother. However, Maryam never interrogates Salma’s cultural conservativeness. Conversely,

Nora is culturally distant from her family. She ‘has gone Western.’ By dating Jeremy, she has become “nothing more than a body, or even a commodity” (Lalami, 2019, p. 263). Therefore, she is the one who needs continuous family guidance and cultural literacy.

Charusheela (2007) claims that diasporic families “[navigate] experience between two nations, two communities. This navigation may be tense, may invoke the need for choosing, or maybe comfortable” (p. 285). Drawing on the Guerraoui family, the response to the allure, temptations and hegemony of the American culture disproportionately varies from one member to another. Driss, for instance, is a modernist character. He supports Nora’s tendencies to pursue art and assimilate into the American culture. He is an atheist. When Nora is asked by Qassim, an eleven-year-old observant boy, to cover her legs before entering the mosque, Driss aggressively argues with him and asks him questions that normally should be addressed to older people. “Do you think,” Driss asks the boy, “that maybe your faith has other things to worry about than my daughter’s legs?” (Lalami, 2019, p. 59). Also, he argues with the imam of the mosque about *hijab*. He drinks alcohol in front of his family and his sole concern is to fit within the American culture.

Obviously, among the members of diasporic families are likely to change due to the tension imposed by the new reality within Western mainstream culture at all levels. Pitkin puts it in this context that “[t]he family is not a thing to be understood in its composition so much as it is a system of relationships that change over time. Family is not stasis but process” (qtd. in Wilson & Pahl, 1988, p. 261). These relationships, thus, are likely to gyrate between keeping ties with the homeland’s culture and assimilation to the host culture. In this vein, Chander (2001) proposes a third trajectory that immigrants may chase: the cosmopolitan model. Nora Guerraoui fits rather as a cosmopolitan character. She is more inclined to individuality. Most of the time, she likes to spend her time away from her family and what the family represents to her. She always quarrels with her mother because of her rebellious behaviour against the cultural standards established by her Arab and Muslim community/family. Nora believes her mother “[is] intolerable” (Lalami, 2019, p. 192). Her ultimate unit of value is her individual self. She therefore denies commitment either to her family or to her Arab and Muslim community. She rejects moulding into any prescribed versions, be them cultural, religious or geographical. When her father was killed, she was drinking champagne in a bistro in Oakland with her roommate, Margo, to celebrate the latter’s win of a grant from the Jerome Foundation. Whenever there is a quarrel between her parents, Maryam and Driss, she resorts to

seclusion: "I couldn't live in that home any longer; my parents' endless fighting made it impossible" (Lalami, 2019, p. 37). She always regards her mother's mindset as obsolete. Whenever she opens a discussion with her mother, she cannot wait to end it and escape. When her mother asked her to do the shopping with her merely to spend some time with her, she "couldn't wait to be alone again" (Lalami, 2019, p. 193). The cosmopolitan Nora, thus, "does not feel the loss or compromise of any essential identity" (Chander, 2001, p. 1043).

The members of Maryam's family constitute a varied social network. Though Driss has struggled to financially support his family by establishing a donut shop, at a later stage he was ready to abandon his wife with whom he has spent over thirty-seven years. Having continuous quarrels with his wife, Maryam, means that he does less to hold his family together than he does to financially succeed. Salma is materialistic, too. Though she has established a successful medical practice with her husband, Tariq, she continuously has fights over the sum of money her father, Driss, has left to Nora, who has no stable job. Nora is always disobedient to the rules of the family set by her mother, Maryam. Given the role that the mother plays in the Arab family in general and the Moroccan family in particular, she never gives up supervising her children morally, religiously and culturally. She never stops praying particularly for Nora's betterment of her life and generally for the entire family's well-being. Maryam says: "I murmured a prayer for her, as I had so many times in the past" (Lalami, 2019, p. 270). Maryam always struggles to keep her family together. Even when Maryam knows that Driss, her husband, has an affair with Beatrice Newland – whose very name connotes Driss's propensity to get rid of all the remnants of the past, including his wife, and embark on a new experience in the *new land* – she does not ask for a divorce, for she believes that the long marriage does not deserve to be thrown away. Also, she wants her younger daughter, Nora, to emulate Salma's successful life. Salma is "married, has two children, and lives a respectable life" (Lalami, 2019, p. 270). In contrast, she considers Nora to be always lost, strong-headed, introverted and a family outcast. Maryam never gives up attempting to get Nora back in the family's bosom. At the novel's end, Nora finally realizes that she has derailed from her family's cultural track. She recognizes that Her mother has "spent years trying to mould [her] into someone she could be proud of, but [Nora] had been so busy breaking of that mould that [she] hadn't noticed all the ways in which [she] was already like her [mother]" (p. 274). Indeed, Maryam represents the magnet of the sense of the Arab family in the West.

The situation of Nora exemplifies the intergenerational struggles there are between immigrant parents and their children. Nora feels she does not have a normal life she has always hankered after. She blames her mother for depriving her of living this life because she prompted her father to come to America: "[m]aybe I would've the ordinary life I had always wanted [...] I wouldn't have been taught, by textbooks, the newspapers, and the movies, to see myself once through my own eyes and another time through the eyes of others" (Lalami, 2019, p. 274). Being self-conscious about who and what an immigrant is and meanwhile seeing himself or herself through the lenses of the cultural Western Other is what W.E.B du Bois calls "double-consciousness" (qtd. in Chander, 2001, p. 250).

One crucial identity factor Maryam relies on in her unrelenting attempts to 'immunize' her family against intra-dispersion and American cultural hegemony is religion. Leviit argues, in this respect, that "religion plays a critical role in identity construction, meaning-making, and value formation. Migrants also use religion to create alternative allegiances and places of belonging" (qtd. in Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008, p. 256). Maryam finds solace in religion whenever things get bad around her. At every skirmish with her husband, she resorts to the Qur'an in search of her inner peace, as Nora states: "[t]hey argued for days, and the more they argued, the more my mother turned to her Qur'an" (Lalami, 2019, p. 37). She gave more importance to reading the Qur'an after the 9/11 attacks. "She had found solace in it after the attacks, reading it to calm herself every morning after listening to the stream of tragedies on the news" (Lalami, 2019, p. 37). Without this spiritual side, Maryam would fail to face the tension resulting from her family's disequilibrium, on the one hand, and mainstream culture, on the other.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to shed light on the challenges Arab immigrant families witness in the diaspora. Previous research has clearly shown that the sense of the Arab family in the West has received almost no research attention. Thus, this article has shown that the family as a cultural constituent is crucial to strengthening the cultural identity of diasporic communities and resisting the cultural pressure of mainstream culture. Furthermore, it has clarified that religion is a paramount factor in strengthening the sense of family in the diaspora. Moreover, the paper has expounded that the mother, especially in the Arab culture, plays a pivotal role in holding the immigrant family together and empowering the sense of family and culture among the members.

However, as has been shown, the tension caused by mainstream culture waters down that sense of family belonging. Often, it culturally dissolves the family from within.

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