

Emigration and Quest for Identity in Laila Lalami's *Hope & Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Akbib's 'The Lost Generation,' and Fandi's *Alien ... Arab ... and Maybe Illegal in America*

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Introduction

This study explores the question of migration and its relationship to cultural identity, focusing on three Moroccan texts written in English: Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Abdellatif Akbib's "The Lost Generation," and Mohamed Fandi's *Alien ... Arab ... and maybe Illegal in America*. Each of these books addresses issues that are raised when Moroccans attempt to leave their country, whether legally or illegally, and changes in the migrant's identity when he or she moves from the homeland to Europe or America. The protagonists of these novels provide various views of the cultural implications of migration and the tremendous frustration and wavering of both personal and cultural identities that may occur during that process.

Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*

The main theme in Laila Lalami's novel is illegal emigration, or what is generally known in Morocco as the phenomenon of *Lahrig*: a group of young people, including Moroccans and other Africans, cross the sea to Spain in an inflatable raft with the idea that migration will improve their lives. Lalami describes the scene: "The six-meter Zodiac inflatable is meant to accommodate eight people. Thirty huddle in it now, men, women, and children, all with the anxious look of those whose destinies are in the hands of others – the captain, the coast guards, God."¹

The writer thus points out skillfully, from the beginning, the dangers of illegal emigration by stressing that not one of the adventurers is in control of his or her destiny. Moreover, the over-crowded Zodiac raft is a precarious mode of transport, as it is liable to sink into the sea during the journey. Yet, the migrants have accepted great risks in the hope of reaching an alluring paradise, which they expect will radically alter their lives, transforming them into rich and happy people.

The opening passage of the novel sheds light on how Spain, or Europe in general, stands as a sort of paradise or *Eldorado* that must be reached at all costs, in the view of these desperate emigrants. The writer reveals the hopeful expectations of one of her protagonists, a young Moroccan man named Murad:

Fourteen kilometers. Murad has pondered that number hundreds of times in the last year, trying to decide whether the risk was worth it. Some days he told himself that the distance was nothing, a brief inconvenience, that the crossing would take as little as thirty minutes if the weather was good. He spent hours thinking about what he would do once he was on the other side, imagining the job, the car, the house. Other days he could think only about the coast guards, the ice-cold water, the money he'd have to borrow, and he wondered how fourteen kilometers could separate not just two countries but two universes.²

If Murad manages to cross to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, he believes it will mean that he is not just in another country but rather in a new universe, a new and superior place that will improve his poor and miserable conditions. After an adventurous “jump” of just fourteen kilometers, the poor, suffering Murad will suddenly be transformed into a happy new man with a job, a car, a house, and a lot of money. So why shouldn't he take the risk for the sake of attaining this dream, this ideal condition?

In this way Laila Lalami explores the psyche of the immigrant. Through Lalami's narration, the reader understands what motivates thousands of Moroccans and other Africans to engage in such a dangerous pursuit as illegal migration. But instead of just exposing and criticizing conditions that are responsible for this phenomenon, Lalami also blames the adventurers themselves. She does this in an indirect manner by contrasting these contemporary *harraga* (a term that refers to migrants who burn their identity cards) to the first Arabs and Moslems who, under the leadership of Tariq Ibn Ziyad, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to conquer territory and build an Islamic civilization. Here again, the author presents these ideas through the wandering thoughts of Murad:

Murad can make out the town where they're headed. Tarifa. The mainland point of the Moorish invasion in 711. Murad used to regale tourists with anecdotes about how Tariq Ibn Ziyad had led a powerful Moor army across the Straits and, upon landing in Gibraltar, *ordered all the boats burned*. He'd told his soldiers that they could march forth and defeat the enemy or turn back and die a coward's death. The men had followed their general, toppled the Visigoths, and established an empire that ruled over Spain for more than seven hundred years. Little did they know that we'd be back, Murad thinks. 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 or armor, without a charismatic leader.³

Here Lalami deliberately juxtaposes two very distant periods of history – the beginning of the eighth century CE when the Moors invaded Spain as *Fatihine* in 711 – and the beginning of the twenty-first century CE, when present-day Moors return, this time in a less glorified manner as migrant workers. Tariq and his men burned their boats when they arrived in Spain so as to fight until victory or glorious death, while the modern *harraga*⁴ burn their identity cards or throw them into the sea, lest they be turned back by the Spanish authorities. It is as if they must dispense with their original identities and start new ones in Europe. This sacrifice of identity is deliberately contrasted with the eighth-century invaders who arrived in Andalusia with the strength of a conquering army and with the stated purpose of conquering territories and creating a civilization that would reflect their religious, cultural, and even economic principles; modern immigrants, instead, are often called upon to reject their cultural and religious identities in the process of migration and submit to the ruling principles of the host nation.

This sacrifice of identity is depicted vividly through the astonishing story of a female protagonist in Lalami's novel, *Faten*, the veiled young girl who also decides to emigrate illegally. Before the adventurous journey, Faten appears to be a devout Muslim who is so principled and pious that she manages to persuade her bourgeois college friend Noura to wear the *hijab* and become a devoted Muslim like her. But no sooner has she arrived in Europe than she not only throws off her veil, a clear symbol of her Islamic identity, but also prostitutes herself to a Spanish policeman in exchange for admission to Spain. The reasons behind this sudden and unexpected change remain ambiguous, but one of the chief causes is her fear of being deported to Morocco after setting foot on Spanish soil:

She'd managed to get to the beach, where the Spanish Guardia Civil was waiting for them. Later, in the holding cell, she saw one of the guards staring at her. She

didn't need to speak Spanish to understand that he 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. The guard had taken her to one of the private exam rooms, away from everyone else. He lifted her skirt and thrust into her with savage abandon.⁵

The grave deal Faten makes with this stranger marks the end of her innocence and the collapse of her original identity. Instead of maintaining her religious principles, she interprets the words of her imam toward her own purpose and barter her virginity for the opportunity to enter Spain without legal documents. This sexual act inaugurates a new phase in her life during which she rejects her previous values.

Abdellatif Akbib's "The Lost Generation"

Unlike Laila Lalami's characters in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Abdellatif Akbib's protagonist Reda, in his short story titled "The Lost Generation," has the option to emigrate to Europe legally. Even though he has an opportunity to get a job in Morocco, he insists on emigrating to France to complete his post-graduate studies. His parents have tried to convince him to stay and work in his country, but they could not persuade him to change his mind:

But Reda was decided. His parents wielded all rhetorical devices to dissuade him, but he was of a stubborn nature ... his counter-rhetoric rested on a clear and simple premise: he knew his future could not be made in his own country; he had to look for it somewhere else, and France was where he could prosper and rise into the world. 'I have always felt out of place here,' he told his father. 'I have problems wherever I go, because people misunderstand me everywhere. I shall end up in jail some day ...'⁶

Reda's determination to leave for France and his complaint that he feels "out of place" in his homeland reveal his dissatisfaction with his identity as a Moroccan. He defends his urgent desire to escape in an attempt to find an alternative identity.

Yet when Reda claims that he will leave Morocco because of its widespread injustices, his father explains that the problem cannot be solved by escape: rather, the father explains that it is the responsibility of Moroccans, especially learned ones like Reda himself, to resist and bring about the desired changes. What is more ridiculous,

according to the father, is that France itself is responsible for many of the problems from which Morocco still suffers:

Remember, my son, that the injustice you are talking about is a virus that was sown by the very country you want to make your future in ... France did not leave Morocco out of love for Moroccans – or out of respect for human rights, for that matter. France was forced to leave the country; it had no choice. And to take revenge on nationalists, those it could not buy with money or position, the French sowed deadly viruses in the Moroccan society before leaving. The injustice you are talking about is one manifestation of that contemptible act, and your decision to go to their country is another.⁷

Here the father blames Reda for not being aware of the imperialistic “viruses” France planted in Morocco during the colonial period. It is senseless, in the father’s view, to build one’s future in France, because such an act implies a lack of historical understanding and a betrayal of one’s cultural identity.

When the father sees that his son is so blinded by the idea of emigrating to France, he yields with one last piece of advice: “Whatever you do, don’t marry a French girl,”⁸ knowing that such a marriage would fully sever his son from his native Morocco and his cultural identity. The father’s rhetorical questions to his son imply the complete loss of identity that would accompany such a marriage: “Would she accept to leave her own country and come to live with you here? In a third-world country? Forever? What if she doesn’t? Would you sacrifice your own country, family and culture to go there for ever?”⁹ The father’s fears and suspicions prove to be well-founded. Although Reda promises not to marry a French woman, he fails to abide by this promise. What is worse, he neglects his parents and family as he becomes engulfed by serious problems in France: “His letters to his parents thus grew few, his phone calls fewer. Then there was no more news of him.”¹⁰

Mohamed Fandi’s Alien ... Arab ... and Maybe Illegal in America

Mohamed Fandi, the writer and the protagonist of this travel account, relates his own experience with emigration to the United States: at first as a legal migrant and later as an undocumented resident. He dedicates his book to all immigrants of the world in his opening page: “I Only Dedicate This Book To People I Don’t Know ... And Particularly To Those Immigrants Who Choose To Live In The Other Side Of

Their Legitimate Frontiers.”¹¹ This statement confirms from the beginning that the author perceives himself as an immigrant who celebrates immigration openly and identifies closely with other immigrants.

In the Preface to his book, Fandi speaks favorably about immigration and praises America for being the land of immigrants:

America is a nation of immigrants! We are all sons and daughters of immigrants and the cultural diversity of America has served to enrich and strengthen the nation. The greatness of America is a reflection of the sacrifice, contributions, and efforts of immigrants. They have greatly enriched the history of the United States. There is reason to celebrate the richness of the cultural diversity that immigration has brought to America!¹²

Here we might notice that Fandi praises and celebrates America and its immigrants: the country for its history as a site of integration for millions of immigrants from different parts of the world; the people for their role in creating a country of rich cultural diversity.

Fandi first travels to America legally through an exchange program between Morocco and the United States. When he gets there, however, he overstays his visa because he is fascinated by the country; he fears that he may never have another opportunity to return to it. He justifies his decision to stay as follows:

It is going to be a huge decision for a Kenyan, a Mexican, a Moroccan, or even for a French immigrant to go back. It has never been easy for an alien to make up his or her mind, to leave America behind with no paper to assure the return. No one wants to risk. Nobody wants to lose the ‘power’ of being in the United States of America.¹³

Fandi feels that there is a privilege and a power in being an American or even being in America. He has a strong faith in the American Dream, and he even believes that all people can possibly share and live this dream. He observes, “As long as America is the first and biggest economy in the world, every human being expresses a wish to live the American dream.”¹⁴

Fandi associates the American Dream with questions of economy and material interests; but what about the spiritual side of this dream? Fandi seems to neglect this aspect, instead focusing on the fact that America is “[t]he first and biggest economy in the world,” and the land where he can have opportunities for work and unlimited access to pleasure. Rather than question the value of this materialistic approach,

as did F. Scott Fitzgerald in his famous novel *The Great Gatsby*, Fandi accepts it unconditionally, claiming that the dream of materialism is uncorrupted and within reach of all people in the United States without discrimination. The reader is left to wonder when Fandi himself will be allowed to reach his share of this dream, when he remains on the margins of American society as an alien immigrant without the security of legal documents for work or residency.

During his long journey in America, Mohamed Fandi changes, especially in his religious path. He says, "I am supposed to pray at least five times a day, which I don't do anymore, shame on me."¹⁵ He is aware of these changes and ashamed; he often considers the advice of his mother back home, who asked him not to become a different person as an immigrant, but rather to retain his original personality and his deep faith in God and his religion. Yet one of the opening chapters is entitled "The Quest For Light," which suggests that Fandi hopes to escape from what he considers "darkness" in his original country, defined, for him, as misery, injustice, and lack of opportunity for young people like him. He claims to find this light and beauty in the United States:

I'm in the land of freedom, the land of business, the land where every day many people around the country become rich, millionaires ... What I felt? It is absolutely amazing ... The sensation to explore more freedom and that is the biggest advantage about living in America. It is actually not only freedom by itself as a result, but it also concerns the way people accomplish, fight and establish that freedom.¹⁶

Fandi idealizes America, for he looks on it as a kind of paradise, and he feels he must stay at any cost. As soon as he arrives in this country, he feels that he is the happiest man on earth. Though he is not himself American, but rather an immigrant without the legal documents to live freely in America, he feels proud of this country. In his view, even "Osama Bin Laden ... would be proud to be in the USA,"¹⁷ and "more than half of my country (and each country around the world) would be ready – anytime – to visit or stay in the States."¹⁸

In the end, although the author is obliged to return to Morocco after living in the United States without residency or work documents for many years, he still retains that ideal image of that country as a land of freedom and an earthly paradise. This is clear from the last message he writes in his epilogue: "I needed to tell you that I was in the United States of America, that this country is the best country of the world, and that I never regretted any minute I spent there. God bless America."¹⁹ For the reader, this unabashed enthusiasm for a country that neither nurtured Fandi

nor retained him becomes a sad and ironic comment contradicting the character's perception.

The characters' quests for alternative identities in Lalami's novel, Akbib's short story, and Fandi's travel account lead to catastrophic results. Though the case of Fandi may be less complex, the examples of Faten and Reda show that emigration, whether legal or illegal, may cause the loss of one's national and cultural identity instead of helping to solve one's problems. The authors of these works, by creating characters who cannot fully realize their dreams, reveal a lost generation.

Notes

- 1 Laila Lalami, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 1–2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 2–3.
- 4 The term “harraga” is derived from the Arabic verb “haraqa,” which means “to burn.” It is actually said that some illegal emigrants burn or get rid of their papers in the hope of staying in the European countries they manage to reach.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 6 Abdellatif Akbib, *The Lost Generation: Collected Short Stories* (Tangier: Slaiki Brothers, 1998), 86.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 11 Mohammad Fandi, *Alien ... Arab ... And Maybe Illegal in America* (Charleston: BookSurge, 2006).
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Fandi, *Alien ... Arab ... Maybe Illegal in America*, 16–17.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 13–14.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 94.