

PATHOLOGIES OF MOORISHNESS: AL-ANDALUS, NARRATIVE, AND “WORLDLY HUMANISM”

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*Abstract: This essay examines political and literary invocations of the history of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) particularly in the post-9/11 era. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of “worldly humanism,” I argue that the Arab predicament today can be properly addressed only by cultivating an Arab consciousness that is freed from the perceived glories of the past and that emanates from within the “worldly” reality of Arab societies in the present. The contemporary Arab novel, particularly that which incorporates Andalusian themes and of which Moroccan-American Leila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) is an example, claims our critical attention in this respect for two main reasons: first, it parodies the affective, and often detrimental, urge to recover elsewhere ideals (al-Andalus in this case); and, second, it anchors its resistive humanistic endeavour in the worldly exigencies of Arab contemporaneity. It is precisely this labour of imaginative and humanistic resistance, I argue, which well entitles work like Lalami's to special critical reflection.*

I. 9/11 and the Pathology of Moorishness

IN *FREEDOM and Orthodoxy: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age* (2004), Moroccan-American scholar Anouar Majid argues that the 1492 Spanish *Reconquista* “[has] in many ways created the ideological foundations of the modern world” (xi). In other words, the virulent religious extremisms, the ongoing political conflicts, and the profound socio-economic disparities that characterize our modern times are to a large extent the result of a Euro-American messianic impulse that initially animated the Spanish *Reconquista* (reconquest), then the European Imperial enterprises, and now the post-9/11 war on Islamic terrorism. The irony of this impulse is perhaps most striking in the Madrid train bombings in March 11, 2004 carried out by an Arab Muslim faction in retaliation for the perceived injustices of the *Reconquista* and Inquisition, a vendetta operation aimed at “settling old accounts with Spain, the Crusader” (Lowney 2005, 1). Moreover, and in a declaration made in the wake of the Madrid attacks, Spain's former President José María Aznar (1996-2004) was quick to place such attacks in the context of an ongoing history of conquest and counter conquest between Moors (i.e. Arab Muslims) and Spaniards:

If you take the trouble to focus on what Bin Laden has written and stated in recent years [...] you will realize that the problem Spain has with Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism did not begin with the Iraq Crisis. In fact, it has nothing to do with government decisions. You must go back no less than 1,300 years, to the early 8th century, when a Spain recently invaded by the Moors refused to become just another piece in the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity. This Reconquista process was very long, lasting some 800 years. However, it ended successfully. There are many radical Muslims who continue to recall that defeat, many more than any rational Western mind might suspect. Osama Bin Laden is one of them. His first statement after 11th September - I

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repeat, the 11th September - did not begin by referring to New York or Iraq. His first words were to lament the loss of Al Andalus - Moorish Medieval Spain - and compare it to the occupation of Jerusalem by the Israelis. (Tremlett 2008, xvii)

Al-Andalus here refers to the historical Arabic name for the Iberian Peninsula (today's Spain and Portugal) when the latter was ruled by the Moors for more than seven centuries, a rule that came to an end in 1492 when the Spaniards conquered Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Europe, and thus successfully culminated their repossession of the entire Peninsula.¹ In former President Aznar's view, therefore, the 3/11 attacks on Madrid symptomize the extent to which the fall of Granada and the ultimate loss of al-Andalus to Christian Spain constitute one of the most enduring traumas that structure the modern Arab psyche, an open wound that still breeds violent historical revanchism at times and triumphal visions of cultural rehabilitation at others.

Al-Andalus, however, does not only refer to the eight-centuries-long history of Moorish political rule in Spain (711 to 1492); it also designates a cultural "Golden Age" in Arab Islamic civilization where the coexistence of different religious communities (Muslims, Christians, and Jews) did not preclude the efflorescence of an unprecedented tradition of multicultural tolerance, artistic creation, and scientific advancements. In fact, many are the scholars of al-Andalus whose significant accomplishments in various branches of knowledge cannot be overstated and continue to be celebrated both in the East and the West up to this day. Suffice it to mention here two of the most well known to the Western public: Avicenna (Ibn Sina), most known for his *Canon of Medicine* (1025), a standard textbook in Europe up until 1650 and still taught in today's universities as part of the history of medicine; and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), most renowned among scholars as "The Commentator," for he authored the most sustained and perhaps most important commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Plato, in addition to other works in Islamic jurisprudence, astronomy, geography, logic, psychology, and politics. Other prominent Andalusian scholars, known perhaps more in the Arabic Islamic world than in the West, include Ibn Hazm from Cordoba, a theologian, historian, jurist, and litterateur, whose *The Ring of the Dove* is viewed by scholars of comparative medieval studies as a classic in the literature of love; and al-Ghazali, a theologian and a Sufi mystic of Persian origin, whose incorporation of Sufism into religious thought had a major influence on the development of both Islamic and Western medieval philosophy. The achievements of these scholars and those of many others in a variety of fields (astrology, physics and optics, botany, medicine, mathematics, architecture, literature, and music) contributed to an extraordinary cultural renaissance in Muslim Spain, and this at a time when the rest of Europe was still wallowing in the dark ages.

In both scholarly and public discourses, then, al-Andalus is persistently remembered as the site of a supreme Arab Islamic civilization characterized by religious and multicultural tolerance and numerous scientific discoveries. It goes without saying that medieval Moorish Spain could not have flourished into the center of a great humanistic culture without an atmosphere of tolerance and conviviality, one that is conducive to the interplay and cross-pollination of

¹The term al-Andalus will henceforth be used interchangeably with Arab, Muslim, or Moorish Spain.

different cultures, ethnicities, and traditions. In fact, this convivial, pluralistic *modus vivendi* which characterized Andalusian society is often described in terms of what the historian Americo Castro calls *convivencia* (cohabitation), designating that quasi-utopian moment of peaceful “living togetherness” among the three confessional communities (Muslims, Jews, and Christians) from the tenth to the late fifteenth century (Castro 1971, 584). Later critics and historiographers, however, have sought to deflate the myth of al-Andalus as a multicultural utopia and suggested that the Iberian Peninsula’s history was in reality characterized by fusion as well as friction, by periods of relatively undisturbed acculturation as well as periods of conflict and mutual distrust.² Any reflection on Arab Spanish history must therefore take into account the fact that such history was by no means unmarred by religious violence and dynastic strife. Indeed, following the decline of the Umayyad caliphate in the early eleventh century, Arab Spain witnessed a half-century (1039-1089) of violent political infighting, as the newly formed mini-states (*Taifas*) constantly vied against one another for dominance over southern Iberia.

The fragmentation of Arab Spain into warring fiefdoms promptly emboldened the Christian princes in the north to claim back pieces of the peninsula by carrying out sporadic raids on their Muslim neighbours to the south. Unable to ward off the rise of crusader Christendom, the petty *emirs* (princes) of al-Andalus had no choice but to summon the support of their North African Muslim brethren, the Almoravids. The Almoravids swiftly heeded the call and sallied forth to Muslim Spain and managed to restore—albeit temporarily—some sort of Muslim suzerainty, only to come back in 1085 after the devastating loss of Toledo to King Alfonso VI of Castile. Notwithstanding its history of intermittent political violence, al-Andalus still figures in the Arab Muslim imaginary as a safe haven for multiple faith communities, a beacon of learning for scholars, and an emblem of unsurpassed architectural splendour and dazzling sybaritic living—a lost paradise (*al-firdaws al-mafqûd*) that may one day be returned to its rightful owners, namely, the Arabs (Snir 2000, 265; Shannon 2007, 308).

In Western eyes, the ultimate return of Muslim dominion over European soil continues to be a looming possibility, especially given the constant influx of massive Arab Muslim populations into Europe during the last two decades. Triggered by the quick rise of Muslim populations inside Western countries, or by what is now called “the other September 11 effect” (Aidi 2003, 43), Western anxieties about an imminent Islamic takeover warranted the implementation of drastic national security measures. Such measures range from the installation of machineries of surveillance and screening to the promotion of ideologies of fear mongering and vigilantism, all of which are intended to forestall the transformation of Europe into what the Egyptian-born, British-Swiss historian Bat Ye’or (Giselle Litmann) calls “Eurabia.” In her book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (2005), Ye’or uses the term to decry the alleged conspiracy between European politicians and a Muslim fanatic fringe the purpose of which is to Islamize Europe and ultimately transform it into an Islamic colony. The late Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (d. 2004) also helped popularize the concept in two controversial anti-Islamic books, *The Rage and the Pride* (2002) and *The*

²For critical re-readings of medieval Spain’s *convivencia* culture, see Mann, Glick, and Dodds (1992); Lewis (1995); Cohen (1996); Menocal (2002); and Fletcher (2006).

Force of Reason (2006), as she draws her venal quill not only against the menacing Arab Muslims but also against the all-too-complacent European Christians who apparently have failed to heed the threat of a “reverse Crusade” carried out by the “sons of Allah” (Carr 2006, 3). Such notions of conspiracism, Spenglerian pessimism, and apocalyptic millenarianism are, sadly enough, still part of the neoconservative arsenal of vehement critical salvos to be readily fired at Western and non-Western liberals whose pro-immigrant multicultural sensibility is thought to undermine the secular democratic values of Europe (Carr 2006, 14).³

This alarmist Islamophobia is certainly never so manifest as when it relates to the Spaniards who share with Arabs undeniable ethnic connections as well as overlapping histories of imperial conquests. To the Spaniards, the constant arrival of Arab and other sub-Saharan immigrants into Spain is disturbingly reminiscent of the medieval Arab Muslim invaders who landed on the shores of Iberia in 711, drove out the Visigoths, and inaugurated Arab Muslim rule in Europe, one that would last for nearly eight centuries. Spain’s anxiety about the dreaded return of the Moors finds its hauntingly eloquent articulation in the epitaph inscribed on the sepulchre of Spain’s most notorious *Reconquista* Monarchs, namely, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. Among the many achievements of these renowned monarchs, only two appear to be deserving of epitaphic commemoration: “Destroyers of the Mohammedan sect and the annihilators of heretical obstinacy [i.e. of the Jews]” (Lowney 2005, 254). In the Spanish collective imaginary, the two monarchs are best remembered for their effort to cleanse Spain’s racial make-up of any “impure” Semitic blood. In fact, and with the introduction of the statutes of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), which denied Moriscos (Moors converted to Christianity) any “genealogical claims to Catholicism” (Majid 2004, 34), Spain effectively established racial purism as the prime condition for Hispanicity. One of the consummate ironies of this abiding maurophobic sentiment was that the Spanish troops that were sent to Iraq in 2003 to establish peace and democracy in the region sported army badges bearing the cross of Santiago *Matamoros* (Saint James of Compostela, “the Moor Slayer”), Spain’s national patron and notorious combatant of Saracens (Arabs) in ninth-century Galicia (Tremlett 2008, 18). Nowhere is the post-9/11 Islamophobia more unfortunate than in these misguided resuscitations of a medieval crusading spirit.

The year 1492 is a crucial moment in Spanish history not only because it marked the beginning of Spain’s imperial adventures in the New World, but also because it inaugurated Spain’s grand narrative of nation building. This narrative is unmistakably driven by one major impulse: asserting a post-Andalusian *espaniolidad* that breaks with the *convivencia* ideal propounded by the “philosemitic school of Americo Castro” (Fuchs 2009, 1). Spain’s narrativization of its post-1492 national identity is based simultaneously on a disavowal of its Moorish past and a desire to gain long-denied access to Europeanness. This denied membership in the European community (at least up until 1986, when

³For further discussions of this dreaded potential Islamization of Europe, see also Melanie Phillips’ *Londonistan* (2006); Claire Berlinski’s *Menace in Europe: Why the Continent’s Crisis Is America’s Too* (2006); and Bruce Bawer’s *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West From Within* (2006).

Spain officially entered the European Union) is usually traced back to the identification of Catholic Spain, especially in the Black Legend pamphlets circulating in late-sixteenth-century Protestant Europe, as “a miscegenated race, tainted by Moorish and Jewish blood” (Fuchs 2009, 116).

As part of a relentless “anti-Spanish propaganda” by other European imperial powers, the Black Legend pamphlets were intended to associate the Spaniard’s “cruelty and greed in the New World” with his “*intrinsic Moorishness*” (Fuchs 2009, 117; emphasis in original).⁴ In the Spanish national imaginary, then, the constant arrival of Arab (and especially North African) immigrants causes anxiety because it carries with it an uncanny reminder of the Medieval Moorish rulers whose ghosts Catholic Spain spent about eight centuries trying to exorcize and who are now returning to claim what is “theirs” (Flesler 2008, 116). In other words, the presence of Arab immigrants in Spain threatens to dissipate Spain’s hard-won European identity and to resuscitate its long-repressed Moorish one (Flesler 2008, 123).⁵

If the year 711, when the Arabs first invaded Spain, represents for the Spanish a moment of great loss, the year 1492, when Muslim Granada fell to the Spaniards, represents for the Arabs a moment of lost greatness. In the Arab world, the 1492 tragedy gave rise to what Akbar S. Ahmed calls the al-Andalus syndrome, that is, the melancholic desire to bring back the glory and greatness that was al-Andalus (2002, 160).⁶ This syndrome, I want to argue, has to do with a *pathological* relation to history, memory, and national identity. The “pathology of Moorishness,” as I wish to qualify such relation, designates the ways in which the memory of al-Andalus in the Arab Muslim imagination becomes so saturated with, and often distorted by, the anxieties of the present (poverty, political oppression, religious persecution, social injustice, etc.) that it loses its heuristic value and may even be mobilized in self-professed missions of conquest and counter-conquest (as is the case with the 9/11 and the Madrid attacks). In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy deploys the phrase “pathologies of greatness” in order to critique Great Britain’s nostalgia for its ethnic unity during the anti-Nazi resistance, as opposed to the ethnic fragmentations that characterize its “multicultural” present (2005, 89). Transposing Gilroy’s insight, I avail myself of the phrase “pathology of Moorishness” to denote the persistence of al-Andalus in the Arab Muslim imaginary not simply as a site of unparalleled Arab Muslim

⁴The “Black Legend” here refers to a number of “anti-Spanish pamphlets that circulated furiously throughout Protestant Europe in the last decades of the sixteenth century and that we have come to know as the Black Legend” (Fuchs 2009, 116). This desire to construct a Western identity “untainted” by Semitic blood is, in fact, consonant with a larger Eurocentric impulse to establish a purportedly autonomous Western civilization unindebted to medieval Arab-Islamic contributions. For further discussion of this subject, see María Rosa Menocal’s classic book *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (1987, 5-9) and also Martin Bernal’s controversial study *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, particularly the first volume on *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (1986).

⁵For a detailed discussion of Spain’s anxiety over Moroccan immigration, see Daniela Flesler’s *The Return of the Moor: Spanish Responses to Contemporary Moroccan Immigration* (2008).

⁶Akbar S. Ahmed writes, “The Andalus syndrome creates a neurosis, a perplexity, in society. It is a yearning for a past that is dead but will not be buried, a fear of an unreliable future which is still to be born” (2002, 160).

achievement but also as a rallying memory in major political conflicts with the West. To address properly the Arab predicament today, I suggest, a new Arab consciousness must be cultivated, one that is freed from its “pathology of greatness” and emanating instead from within the “worldly” reality of Arab societies in the present.

In most twentieth-century Arab writing—be it in the poetry of Ahmed Shawqi (Egypt), Nizar Quabbani (Syria), and Mahmoud Darwish (Palestine) or in the novels of Jurji Zaydan (Lebanon), Amin Maalouf (Lebanon), and Radwa Ashur (Egypt)—al-Andalus is constantly evoked with elegiac nostalgia as the site of an ideal past against which the violent failures of modern Arab polities are measured.⁷ Post-9/11 Arab literature, however, I want to argue, seeks to undermine this tendency to mythify and immortalize the Andalusian legacy and highlight the dangers of constructing national identities out of a historical memory that is no longer compatible with the realities of the present. Works like Moroccan-American Leila Lalami’s *Hope and Other dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Jordanian-American Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003), and Franco-Moroccan Tahar Bin Jelloun’s *Leaving Tangier* (2006), to name but a few examples of such literature, develop Andalusian tropes that clearly signal a departure from earlier and more romanticized literary representations of al-Andalus. More importantly still, through their critical re-imagining of al-Andalus, I argue, these authors envision a modern Arab consciousness that derives from the lived social reality of Arab societies—societies that are, despite any claim to the contrary, increasingly secular both in outlook and sentiment. Post-9/11 Arab fiction, particularly that which incorporates Andalusian themes and of which Lalami’s novel *Hope* will be the selected example for this essay, claims our critical attention for two main reasons: first, it parodies the affective, and often detrimental, urge to recover elsewhere ideals (al-Andalus in this case); and, second, it anchors its critique in the material exigencies of Arab contemporaneity.

⁷For a comprehensive list of Arabic Andalusian dirges, see Alexander E. Elinson’s *Looking Back at Al-Andalus: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature* (2009), where mourning the lost cities (*ritha al-mudun*) is identified as a major trope in medieval Andalusian poetics. Romantic invocations of an Andalusian “Golden Age” are particularly persistent in Arabic *belles-lettres*. See Granara for an assessment of the uses of al-Andalus as an idealized chronotope in the twentieth-century Arabic novel. Romanticized Andalusian topology is also a salient feature in modern Arabic poetry, especially in the works of Ahmed Shawqi, Nizar Quabbani, and Mahmoud Darwish. See Noorani, for an insightful discussion of Andalusian poetics in Ahmed Shawqi and Urdu-Persian Moahmmad Iqbal. Recent literary works (by Arab and non-Arab writers) that incorporate Andalusian themes and settings include Lebanese Amin Maalouf’s *Leo Africanus* (1994); Egyptian Radwa Ashur’s *Granada Trilogy* (1994-95), the first part of which (*Granada*) was translated from Arabic into English in 2003; Tariq Ali’s *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1993), the first novel of his *Islam Quartet* (1993-2005); Lewis Weinstein’s *The Heretic* (2003); and Kevin Oderman’s *Going* (2006). This is not to mention, of course, Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor Last Sigh* (1996), which turns the notorious sigh of the lachrymose Nasrid King Boabdil, as he hands over the keys of Alhambra in Granada to the Christian monarchs, into a symbol not only of the loss of the last seat of Muslim rule in Europe (Granada), but also of the failure of Modern India to live up to the multicultural ideal it inherited from its post-1492 Jewish diaspora.

Narrative reconstructions of al-Andalus in light of the political exigencies of the Arab world today, however, inevitably raise a host of conceptual and ethical questions: How do we understand narrative enunciations of the Andalusian legacy in the present and what are the tropological, conceptual, and ethical limits of such enunciative moments? How to narrativize an Arab collective imaginary melancholically drawn to the glory of its Moorish past and at the same time preclude the mobilization of that imaginary by militant ideologies (Islamism, for instance) in proverbial missions of vengeance and counter-conquest? To what extent appropriations, literary or otherwise, of the Andalusian past steer clear of a potential ideological entrapment in the Manichean logic of post-9/11 master narratives? The politics and poetics of al-Andalus, particularly in post-9/11 Arab writing, remain to be adequately examined. This essay is in part an effort to address such inadequacy.

II. Al-Andalus, Narrative, and “Worldly Humanism”

Contemporary Arab fiction about al-Andalus compels our attention more urgently now than ever, precisely because it instigates, amongst other things, a critical interrogation on the relevance of the Andalusian past to the changing and heterogeneous realities of Arab societies today. It is, in fact, this self-critical attitude toward the Andalusian past that allows us to maintain its enabling energies without saturating it with the political anxieties of the present. Moreover, only a critical attentiveness to the historical specificity of the Andalusian experience, I argue, will undercut its potential activation in East-West civilizational clashes and inscribe it instead in what Edward Said calls “worldly humanism.” Anchored in “the real historical world” and defined primarily by “its democratic, secular, and open character” (2004, 48; 22), the humanistic critique that Said envisions and which I perceive operating in work like Lalami’s allows us to bring into creative harmony the inspiring memory of al-Andalus, on the one hand, and the socio-political urgencies of the present, on the other.

Because the *actual* always and ineluctably precedes the *potential*, Said argues, any system of humanistic knowledge in any society must first proceed from close scrutiny of the “worldly reality” of that society (75). The “worldly,” according to Said, “denote[s] the real historical world from whose circumstances none of us can in fact ever be separated, not even in theory” (48). When applied to the humanities in educational institutions, worldliness comes to suggest that “all texts and all representations [are] *in* the world and subject to numerous heterogeneous realities” (49; emphasis in original). In other words, any intellectual enterprise, literary or otherwise, is historically situated and determined by a number of social, economic, and political factors. Moreover, a veritable humanistic education, according to Said, involves a special attitude toward the pursuit of learning, one that is open to the influences of foreign cultures and driven by a persistent desire to seek knowledge regardless of its nature and its source. Secular in nature and interrogative in method, humanistic practice should be “a process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation” (21-2). In short, Said’s worldly humanism describes a comprehensive educational project that incorporates a plethora of world civilizations and that has one single purpose: the cultural and moral edification of humankind and the attainment of that *eudaimonic* ideal in society, that is, the

attainment of happiness, which is the ultimate end of all human action. Never more urgently than today, I insist, do we need to claim this Saidian humanistic model in order to counter the exclusivist ideologies that seek to circumscribe the possibilities of critique and resistance.

In the context of the post-9/11 Islamophobic culture, Said's worldly humanism becomes an urgent critical and cultural project, for it helps us resist discourses that capitalize on morally complacent attitudes toward violence. It is clear to everyone now that the popular media in the West reveals only so much of the narrative of Islamic terrorism as is necessary for the purpose of condemning it as an unfathomable human aberration, at best, or an emanation of pure evil, at worst. A humanist critique that is both worldly and democratic is eminently essential for our war-ridden times, and this for two reasons: first, it helps us move beyond the neoconservative narratives that seek to pre-package our moral response to violence; and, second, it invites a serious enquiry into the historical, and often contingent, circumstances that give rise to that violence. Both intellectuals and academics must be wary of the purveyors of anti-Muslim propaganda whose xenophobic patriotism continues to gain significant and dangerous political and ideological purchase in Western mainstream culture. The humanistic culture desperately needed today is one that interrogates the complacent public discourse that seeks to circumscribe what it perceives to be the proper and thus permissible response to human violence and suffering. The practice of "humanistic resistance" (73), as Said calls it, "must literally break the hold on us of the short, headline, sound-bite format and try to induce instead a longer, more deliberate process of reflection, research, and enquiry argument that really looks at the case(s) in point" (74). In other words, the humanistic academy must resume its center-stage position in the public sphere and bring to public consciousness alternative (i.e. non-Western) narratives and experiences that may help us address better the re-emerging ideologies of violence.

I should like now to examine briefly one of the post-9/11 Anglophone Arab novels, Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), and show how its incorporation of Moorish themes is less the signature of a melancholy Arab author lamenting the lost greatness that was al-Andalus, as is the case of most Arab authors in the previous century, than an exercise in critical self-scrutiny anchored in the dystopian social reality of the Arab world. Consonant with Said's conceptualization of worldly humanism, the narrativization of the pathology of Moorishness in Lalami's *Hope*, I want to argue, contributes to a "worldly" Arab literary discourse that draws primarily on the material realities of contemporary Arab societies.

Lalami's debut novel opens in *medias res* with thirty illegal immigrants crossing the Strait of Gibraltar toward Spain on an inflatable Zodiac boat. Among these *harraga* (dialect Arabic for North African illegal immigrants) are the four central Moroccan characters whose lives before and after the precarious fourteen-kilometre crossing constitute the main chapters in the book: Murad Idrissi, a jobless English Major who occasionally works as a tourist guide, goading fans of Paul Bowles into trips around Morocco; Faten Khatibi, a misguided college student who flirts temporarily with Islamic fundamentalism, only to end up a clandestine prostitute in Spain; Halima Bouhamsa, an indigent mother of three, who struggles to obtain a divorce from her abusive husband; and Aziz Amor, a talented but destitute mechanic who lands a less-than-decent job in

a restaurant in Spain after his successful attempt at escaping the Spanish coast guards.⁸

I shall restrict my discussion here to a key passage at the beginning of the novel, in which we find university graduate Murad huddling in the Zodiac boat with the other *harraga* halfway across the Strait and contemplating the ironic unfolding of history:

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 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 armour, without a charismatic leader. (Lalami 2005, 2-3)

Murad's invocation of that inaugural moment in Arab history, when the Arab and Berber armies under the much celebrated commandership of the converted Berber (native inhabitant of North Africa) Tarik Ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into Iberia in 711, is important here in two respects: first, it parodies the fantasy of a redemptive Moorish return, since the returning Moors are not the Arab invaders of yore, but rather their postcolonial descendents, the flotsam and jetsam of the former colonies disgorged by the *mare nostrum* onto European shores; second, and more importantly, it imputes the plight of the Arab immigrant, at least in part, to the enduring failures of the postcolonial Arab polity. Indeed, in the dim and grim setting of modern Morocco, Lalami seems to suggest, calls for the return of a Moorish dominion in Europe ring all but false and hollow.⁹

Murad's embittered reflection on the historical irony underlying the plight of North Africa's *harraga* today is symptomatic of what Tunisian critic Nouri Gana eloquently describes as a "melancholic wound, fissuring chiasmatically between narcissistic cultivation and elegiac vulnerability" (2008, 234). "In the history of

⁸In colloquial Arabic the term *harraga* (literally meaning "those who burn") is a label for North African immigrants who cross clandestinely into southern Europe, burning in the process, literally, their documents to avoid deportation and, metaphorically, the life of poverty and oppression they are leaving behind. Many of these immigrants drown before they reach European shorelines.

⁹It is perhaps no historical coincidence that Tariq Ibn Ziyad is notoriously reported to have ordered his ships burned upon landing on Iberian shores in Spring 710 and to have exhorted his soldiers with the famous address: "Whither can you fly,--the enemy is in your front, the sea at your back. By Allah! There is no salvation for you but in your courage and perseverance" (Lowney 2005, 30). Very few are the *harraga* who are not familiar with the famous incident. Illegal immigration continues to be a predominant theme particularly in Francophone North African literature. See, for example, Mahi Binebine's *Cannibales* (1999), Salim Jay's *Tu ne Traverseras pas le Detroit* (2000), Youssouf Yassine Elalamy's *Les Clandestins* (2001), and Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Partir* (2006, translated into English in 2009 as *Leaving Tangier*).

Arab consciousness,” Gana goes on to explain, al-Andalus figures at one and the same time as “a distant utopia of inimitable Arab achievement” and “an unjustly but irrecoverably lost key to rightful home” (234). The idyllic memory of al-Andalus as “God’s paradise on earth, ‘*jannat Allāh ‘alā al-ard*’” (Snir 2000, 265), occupies the Arab imaginary more as a haunting absence than a definitive loss. Neither fully present nor irrecoverably lost, al-Andalus cannot, therefore, be the object of conclusive mourning, for conclusive mourning is predicated primarily on the belief in the irrecoverability of loss. Taking my cue from Gana’s idea of “Arab melancholia” and its post-Andalusian emanations (234), I would like to suggest that this melancholic longing is driven, not solely by the enduring affect of un-mourned loss, but also by the political and socio-economic structures of power that determine the primary conditions for such melancholic longing. Woven into the portraits of Lalami’s many characters is also the unsettling portrait of modern Morocco as it grapples with high unemployment rates, corrupt bureaucracy, and rising Islamic radicalism. The unspeakable social conditions that Lalami’s characters face and the lack of educational and professional opportunities conducive to their social and cultural integration often toss them into an insalubrious environment of crime and prostitution and usually drive them to sail forth into prosperous Europe, only to find themselves shipwrecked on the reef of hollow hopes and dangerous pursuits.

While open to a variety of hermeneutic possibilities, the post-Andalusian motif, as I see it in Lalami’s novel, signals to a story far more alarming than the professed post-9/11 Moorish return. A quick glance at the 2009 United Nations Arab Human Development Report reveals an abundance of sobering facts about the extreme fragility of the social, economic, and political structures of many Arab regions today—something which certainly commands our attention more urgently than the alarmist mantras of the “Eurabian” kind. In 2005, for instance, 20.3 % of the Arab population, the report indicates, was still surviving on less than the 2-dollars-a-day international poverty threshold (11). Morocco, which is considered a low-middle-income country by World Bank classification standards, is one of the highest scoring Arab countries on the Human Poverty Index with 38.1 %, right after the three low-income countries of Sudan, Yemen, and Mauritania (11). Moreover, “the spectre of unemployment” continues to loom over many Arab regions as “the major source of economic insecurity.” In the case of Morocco, one of the surveys included in the report indicates that 81 % of Moroccans believe that unemployment is the highest threat to human security (26), human security being defined here as “the liberation of human beings from those intense, extensive, prolonged, and comprehensive threats to which their lives and freedom are vulnerable” (17). Over 60% of Moroccan households also report having at least one family member who is unemployed and looking for work (110).

Political corruption and failure to adhere to international charters of human rights are also revealed to be among the persistent obstacles to human security and development in the Arab regions. Most Arab states have acceded to and ratified such charters, but they still have yet to bring their legislative initiatives in line with the stipulations of international conventions (5). Violation of the norms of democratic governance and the failure to uphold and guarantee the human right to life and freedom clearly suggest that security of the state takes precedence over security of the individual. Worse still, in the aftermath of 9/11 and with the

passage of the US Patriot Act, many Arab governments relied on a broad and vague definition of “terrorism” in order to empower their national security agencies and thus clamp down on opposition parties, muzzle dissenting voices, and exert tighter scrutiny on public media outlets. In Morocco, for example, and following the May 16 2003 bomb attacks in Casablanca (killing 45 people), the government was reported to have held in *gard-à-vue* detention between 2,000 and 5,000 people on charges of having ties with Islamic terrorism. In the absence of *habeas corpus* in Morocco, the *gard-à-vue* policy meant that detainees were held in custody over an indefinite period of time (often beyond the 48-to-144-hour legal limit) and had no access to legal counsel, nor were their lawyers informed of the arrest date. This means that the pre-trial detention could be extended *sine die*, and may in some cases lead to the disappearance of the detainee during the secret investigation (Slyomovics 2005, 17).

In a nutshell, what the findings of the UN Arab Human Development Report confirm is that the entrenchment of autocratic regimes and the structural vulnerability of Arab economies constitute the real threat to human security in Arab societies, a threat which the underprivileged segments of those societies seek to avert, ironically enough, by exposing themselves to more dangerous threats. A painful case in point is the perilous journey across the Mediterranean undertaken daily by the *harraga* of North Africa, a journey the motives of which are invariably socio-economic. The regular and unchecked immigration of large numbers of impoverished and desperate North-African and sub-Saharan populations into Europe, especially through the Spanish Mediterranean outposts of Ceuta and Melilla, often fosters an underground culture of drug dealings and organized crime and conveniently provides European-based radical Islamist networks with an illicit supply of recruits.¹⁰ A few figures highlighting the gravity of the phenomenon are in order here. In 2003, for instance, Spain alone counted 600,000 illegals (Celso 2005, 89). In 2006, the Spanish government reported the death of 6,000 *harraga*, an event that led Massimo D’Alema, the by-then Italian minister of foreign affairs, to call it “the tragedy of the 21st Century” (89). Moreover, the mafias involved in trans-Mediterranean human smuggling are estimated to rake off up to \$ 8 billion a year from illegal transportation across the Strait (89).

In part, it is also the failure of the integration policies in many European countries that accounts for the marginalization of ethnic minorities and thus for the potential radicalizing of such disenchanted minorities by Islamist organizations. As Hisham D. Aidi puts it, “Though Westerners of different social and ethnic backgrounds are gravitating towards Islam, it is mostly the ethnically marginalized in the West—historically, mostly black, but nowadays also Latino, Arab American, Arab and South Asian minorities—who, often attracted by purported universalism and colour-blindness of Islamic history and theology, are asserting membership in a transnational *umma* and thereby challenging or ‘exiting’ the white West” (2006, 44). It is little short of disgraceful that France,

¹⁰The 3/11 Madrid bombings were carried out by Moroccan youth tied to fringe Islamist terror groups operating in Ceuta and Melilla. “According to Spanish authorities,” Anthony Celso writes, “Ceutan and Melillan drug gangs are sources of financial support for Islamist terror groups, mosques, and community organizations in Spain” (2005, 91).

the country most alarmed by the rise of Islamism, is also the country where “50 to 60 percent of [its] prison population is Muslim” (46).

Lalami’s exceptional narrative endeavour resides in dramatizing the ways in which anxiety about the limited socio-economic possibilities of the present may trigger dangerous re-openings of the perceived ideals of the past. And this is precisely the worldly humanist task that I perceive and commend in her novel. Lalami participates in Said’s worldly humanist critique by compelling us to rethink the emerging post-9/11 grand narratives (the progressive, secular West vs. the regressive, religious East) in terms of the often-unacknowledged micro-narratives of Arab struggles for dignity, freedom and equal opportunities. In fact, it is this attentiveness to the socio-economic reality of Arab societies that lends work like Lalami’s concurrently to literary criticism and social analysis and undercuts its potential marketing as exotic “Third-World” literary commodity vacated of any transformative political energies or resistive values.

Conclusion

The pressures of the current global economy, on the one hand, and the lack of sustained human development in the Arab world, on the other, generate a melancholic urge to reconnect with the purported glories of the past. The deficiency of Arab economies, exacerbated in no small measure by the exigencies of globalization, often precipitates the re-activation of the perceived ideals of the Andalusian past and the potential ideological mobilization of the latter in the service of civilizational conflicts between the Muslim East and the Christian West. The ethico-historical burden that the Andalusian legacy places upon us, I insist, is that we apply to it the same exacting scrutiny that we apply to the other legacies of modern history (colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, fascism, capitalism, etc). Only then can we open up the rich cultural heritage of al-Andalus to a plethora of enabling hermeneutic possibilities in the present. As the world continues to be drawn into the vortex of terrorist violence, “wrapt in the old miasmal mist” of religious dogmas (*pace* T. S. Eliot), “thinking in dark times,” to use Julia Kristeva’s phrase, may seem to be the modern intellectual’s impossible task. Be that as it may, a relentlessly secular and democratic humanistic pursuit *à la* Said may still hold out a measure of hope for a more convivial coexistence.

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