

MAKING HISTORY USABLE: AL-ANDALUS AS A SITE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

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***Abstract:** In ethnic literature, the historical and cultural past constantly haunt the present, producing contemporary narratives which emphasize how the heritage plays an essential role in preserving ethnic identity. From a trans-historical perspective, Arab American women's narratives tend to turn the history of Al-Andalus (Medieval Moorish Spain) into cultural memory as a way of coping with the threats to their existence in the United States, particularly post-9/11, as well as of resisting the hegemonic culture. The aim of this paper is to investigate how Al-Andalus is intended to be seen as a construct of cultural memory and how this site of memory has the power to reshape individual and collective identity.*

***Keywords:** 9/11, Al-Andalus, cultural memory, identity, women's history.*

1. Introduction

In the last decades, literary and cultural studies have had fierce debates on the concepts of culture, identity and politics for different sorts of reasons. One main reason is that the issue of present-day migration requires cultural recognition to preserve ethnic identity, when multiculturalism has been functionalized as a tool to insert a certain ideology and reinforce marginality toward immigrant communities. Indeed, identity has become a prominent subject and a crucial topic for discussion in the literary and cultural fields, in order to explore the processes of (re)construction and negotiation of identity. Scholars and intellectuals attempt to design an interdisciplinary approach to understand how identity has been shaped.

Stuart Hall points to the idea of an ongoing process of identity construction, which has been viewed as a problematic process. Hall points out that every culture and its significance have an essential role of identity construction through the notion of memory:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (Hall1990:222)

In an attempt to investigate and highlight the function of cultural identity and its representation, Stuart Hall also openly discusses the fact that cultural identity is the key element to reshaping our world in multicultural and transnational communities:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (Hall 1990:223).

In a diasporic society, however, such historical and cultural sites project an integral aspect of an imaginary coherence in which these sites have been identified with the process of identity reconstruction on the one hand, and to overcome the experience of fragmentation and the changing of social order on the other hand. Thus, sharing the history and culture has been utilized as "a matrix for ontological self-presence", and memory is being viewed as a "catalyst" that links identity and culture (Kunow 2008:8). In 1924, Marc Bloch, in his seminal work *Les Rois Thaumaturges*, explained the connection between history and memory and provided a new method to study the history of "collective representation" and "collective ideas" (Confino 2010:78). This led the scholars to use historical and sociological instruments in order to study the collective representation of a particular community in the past. Therefore, the processes of construction of individual and collective identity have been connected in various ways to cultural memory.

The concept of cultural memory is closely related to both the past of a community and its ethnic identity, particularly in the case of migration. In a comprehensive analysis, Jan and

Adeila Assmann's study *Kulturelles Gedächtnis (Cultural Memory)* outline the deep connections between cultural memory and identity, defining the former as "the faculty that allows us to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develop an image and an identity for ourselves" (Meckien 2013:1). In this sense, cultural memory helps us to study the functional relationship between the recollection of the past and its connection to the present, as well as how culture and historical mnemonics are connected together to create a dialogue focusing on the process of collective representation.

In the case of post-colonial struggles and a profound sense of marginality, the minority and ethnic groups seek to share the past and (re)produce collective historical and cultural consciousness within community members. In post-9/11, thus, cultural memory becomes imperative in the process of (re)connecting community members to the past in order to grasp the so-called cultural continuity, and it is defined as the "outer dimension of human memory" (Assmann 1992:19).

2. Al-Andalus as a Source of Cultural Memory

Cultural memory is contained in the image of Al-Andalus itself; this memory is expressed and deeply rooted in a historical reality. The devotion of the Arab-American community to sharing and carrying the story of Al-Andalus explains their belief in this place as a symbol of hope and strength. The memory of Al-Andalus provides a sense of self-identification and recognition of one's own heritage and culture. As part of cultural memory, Al-Andalus becomes a key source to bringing together a community of people, introducing a bond between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and presenting the case for a more inclusive history and society. Therefore, Al-Andalus continues to exist, as there is an increasing need for reassertion of identity and resistance to the most challenging external threats that intend to annihilate cultural differences.

For many reasons, Al-Andalus is intended to be seen as an aspect of cultural memory: (1) it represents a medium of carrying memory; (2) it provides a sense of unification through time and stimulates dignity of the past as well as collective representation; (3) it emancipates from humiliation and marginality. Thus, the Arab-American community and their devotion to the image of Al-Andalus can be explained by the concept of cultural memory. It is also significant to study the cultural memory with a grounding of Al-Andalus history, due to the fact that history between 711 and 1492 has been interpreted by a diversity of cultures and religions, and Al-Andalus itself has a powerful influence on our present day, showing the harmonious coexistence which is missing from our modern world.

Preserving ethnicity can be achieved by the reshaping of identity. The power of cultural memory can reconstruct the past to shape the existence of the present in a meaningful manner. The process of reinterpreting Al-Andalus as part of cultural memory conveys a sense of both intellectual decision and an affective process. Remembering and transmitting Al-Andalus history is mainly a matter of strength needed to maintain Arab-American identity and it might be seen as a reactivation of the moral issues that might help to re-establish an ideal place in the world today:

The *power* of cultural memory rests in the *conscious* decision to choose particular memories, and to give those memories precedence in communal remembrance [...] cultural memory transmits an experience rooted in history that has reached a culturally definitive, potentially transformative status. (Rodriguez and Fortier 2007:12)

Moreover, September 11 has brought back to life the history and memories of 711-1492. One important component of remembering Al-Andalus is whether it will be understood in a positive or a negative light and, thus, the contemporary nostalgia for Al-Andalus has to be perceived as a “multicultural interfaith humanism” and “a way of thinking or a form of being”, not as revival of old fear and phobia of the Moorish return (Stearns 2009:356-7). I would argue that Al-Andalus should be read as culturally shared representations, basing my argument on Stuart Hall’s view of sharing common history to achieve a shared cultural identity. One might read the nostalgia for Al-Andalus in a negative manner. However, this kind of understanding associates the memory of Al-Andalus with the notion of orientalised Al-Andalus history to turn Al-Andalus into two paradigms of Eastern roots and Western roots, creating thus an ethnic distinction and discipline boundaries.

Maira Rosa Menocal (1992:488) discusses the idea of categorizing Al-Andalus culture into a so-called “(un)desirable cultural” favouritism in favour of political ideologies by focusing on Greece and Rome as models of perfect culture and ignoring what culture unfolds behind *Madīnat al-Zahrā*, *Alhambra*, *Mezquita-Catedral* and that long chapter of seven centuries from 711 to 1492 in the Iberian Peninsula. This bond has to be demolished to stop people from making exceptions based on ethnic distinctions which consequently associate Al-Andalus with Arabic/Muslim but not with multi-ethnicities and religions such as Christian/Latin, Muslims/Arabs, and Jewish/Hebrew. Al-Andalus cannot be a very different chapter, separate from the European history. If we look, for instance, in the history of European culture, the age of classicism, the romantic writers and poets were looking towards

ancient Greece and Rome as perfect models of culture to reshape the European culture after that Dark Age. In contrast, there is nothing negative about it when some writers go back to the history of Al-Andalus to create a model symbol of culture.

This study focuses on two novels, Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), taking Al-Andalus as a source of cultural memory and as a signifier or a metaphor for something in each one of them. Perhaps telling stories written by women writers and from a female perspective announce an interesting debate not only about gender, but also about history, politics, and culture. Therefore, there are some crucial questions I attempt to answer through this analysis, such as how Al-Andalus has been constructed in these two texts; what kind of memory they bring or create particularly in the post-9/11 world. Historical accuracy does not come in, what matters is why they evoked the memory of Al-Andalus in the modern era.

3. The Andalusian Chronotope in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*

The Al-Andalus chronotope represents the core of Leila Lalami's fictions, bringing together the historical memory of Al-Andalus and the current socio-cultural context. One of the reasons why Laila Lalami chose the Andalusian trope in her novels (*Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and recently *The Moor's Account*) is because the novels not only question matters of intellectual enterprise of the Al-Andalus memory, but also claim that our memories are highly selective, addressing a number of political, social, cultural and economic factors.

Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) depicts thirty illegal immigrants trying to cross the Mediterranean from Morocco to Spain. Lalami introduces in her novel four main characters: Murad Idrissi, Faten Khatibi, Halima Bouhamsa, and Aziz Amor and she also shows that different social, political, economic and religious reasons were behind each of them taking this huge risk. However, to illustrate my argument, one particularly suggestive passage has been picked out on this subject within the philosophy of memory and history, and it will be used in order to point out the role narrative structures play in the recollection of the past:

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).

In the aftermath of 9/11, Al-Andalus becomes an urgent cultural project as well as a means to promote resistance against stereotypes attached to Arab-Americans. Lalami focuses on the process of remembering, including mourning, modes of criticism of the dystopian social reality, as well as the political reality of the contemporary Arab world. Laila Lalami's collection of stories is a relevant example, which proves that creating an inspiring memory of Al-Andalus between Africa and Spain is a fertile site for investigating the material realities of the Arab communities, interconnected with the Moorish theme of mourning the great loss of Al-Andalus. On the other hand, Lalami attempts to show how the legacy of Moorish Spain comes back to the social and political scenes in Spain.

Alongside narratives of legendary history, such memories impact the readers' understanding of the past and thus bring back the history of 711, when the Arabs under Tarik Ibn Ziyad crossed Gibraltar into the Iberian Peninsula. Lalami, in a postcolonial era, employs this historical memory in her writing to deconstruct an old phobia of the returning Moors when it comes to associate this stereotype with the debate of illegal migration from North Africa to Spain. Lalami eventually addresses this debate which was marked by an old fear of the Moors and attached to the Arab-Muslim invasion of 711 which developed fear and phobia in Spanish political discourse and migration policy (Dietz 2004:1100). Lalami sternly reminds readers that these stereotypes reflect the awareness of the historical events of recalling such themes as anti-Moorish or anti-Islam and, as a result, create more bigotry and racism, as well as ethnic distinction. Thus, Lalami shares what Hisham Aidi, in his 2005 essay, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and Connected Histories", reflects on the idea of returning to the Moorish *convivencia* and multiculturalism, but not the old phobia.

Moorish Spain was a place where Islam was in and of the West, and inhabited a Golden Age before the rise of the genocidal, imperial West, ahistorical moment that disenchanted Westerners can share with Muslims. Neither Muslim nostalgia for nor Western Orientalist romanticism about Andalusia is new, but it is new for different subordinate groups in the West to be yearning for "return" to Moorish Spain's multiracialism (Aidi 2005:49).

The legacy of Al-Andalus has been used to ethnicize arabphobia and islamophobia with regard to contemporary discussions on migration from North Africa to Spain. Thus, the

image of Al-Andalus has emerged in the novel to promote clear-cut ethnic boundaries. The figure of Al-Andalus is meant to serve here as melancholic longing for political, social and economic power. These issues have mingled with Lalami's characters, as she examines the human condition through fictional memory and depicts how her characters face social and political struggles, lack of hope, political corruption, and the feeling of in-betweenness.

Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* dramatizes Arab struggles for dignity, hope and strength. Lalami is concerned about the contemporary Arab socio-political realities, which become too fragile a ground for any transformative political ideology. She has participated with other intellectuals in re-thinking and re-discussing an ideal past, in response to the 9/11 attacks. Lalami depicts her characters as caught up in the midst of cultural, political and economic struggles, perpetuating the lives of Arabs and Muslims even across the border. Clearly, the cultural imaginary of Al-Andalus is deep seated and occupies Arab minds as part of a process of remodelling their socio-political realities.

4. Readings Women's Concerns within Al-Andalus History in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

There is no doubt that Al-Andalus history was made by women as well as by men; thus, the role of women in Al-Andalus history points to their presence in the shaping of cultural memory. We have great intellectual women who have not been sufficiently acknowledged in the narrative of the past such as Fatima al-Maghani, I'timad al-Rumaykiyya, Hafsa Hamdun Zaynab al-Nafazawiyya, A'isha al-Hurra, Nazhun al-Garnatiya, Ghayat al-Muna, Maryam bint Abi Ya'qub al-Ansari, Hafsa bint Hajj ar-Rakuniyya, Buthaynah bint al-Mu'tamid, and Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, among many others on a long list. Consequently, studying women's concerns in relation to Al-Andalus society should be taken up by any scholar wishing to explore women's status in that long chapter of history.

Al-Andalus women occupied a confusing position when it comes to the study of the level of liberation in Islamic Iberia. In recent studies, however, researchers have attempted to study this kind of emancipation with regard to women's social, cultural, and political positions. Thus, literature, particularly poetry, plays an essential role in defining the condition of Andalusian women, and Al-Andalus women's poetry in particular gave scholars a space to evaluate what level of emancipation they enjoyed, with scholars studying all evidence of the social and political status these women had.

Mohja Kahf is an Arab-American poet, who has been attached to the stereotypical representation of "oppressed Muslim women", and who attempts to associate this discourse

with the history of Andalusian women. Reacting to such themes as Andalusian women's independence, and freedom of speech, Mohja Kahf introduces Wallada bint al-Mustakfi as the key literary figure in women's history of Al-Andalus to raise awareness of the women's civil status in Muslim Spain. Moreover, Kahf seeks to create a connection between the history of Al-Andalus women and the Arab-American women's positions in the contemporary world. Thus, Kahf made this contribution to establish a dialogue to elicit the importance of tracing women's history, to build a strong argument against stereotypical representations and patriarchy and to expose the hegemonic feminist agendas towards Arab and Muslim women. As Gerda Lerner (1993:12) indicates, "For thinking women, the absence of Women's History was perhaps the most serious obstacle of all to their intellectual growth"; therefore, Mohja Kahf acknowledges and confirms the knowledge about the existence of Al-Andalus women to develop collective consciousness as a group nowadays.

Furthermore, Kahf's goal is that serious attention should be paid to the study of Andalusian women's poetry and its implications in defining the social and political status of women in Al-Andalus. Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* uses the significant representation of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi's poetry as an act of bearing witness to the women's emancipation, which promotes the idea that women's poetry has multiple functions and implications to be pursued in connection to what Gerda Lerner (1993) called "feminist consciousness" in relation to Al-Andalus history. Above all, Wallada was a prominent figure of literate women of Al-Andalus who played a major role in presenting the female voice through the topics that she introduced which are associated with the issue of women's concerns:

If you'd been loyal to the love we had,
that other girl would not have turned your head.
You knew I was the full moon rising,
but went for the cheap Miss Thing instead (Kahf 2006:415).

In another case Wallada said:

I am fit for high positions by God,
And am going my way armed with pride.
I allow my lover to touch my cheek,
And bestow my kiss on him who craves it (Conliffe 2016:1).

Maria J. Viguera's *Asluhu li' l-ma'ali: On the Social Status of Andalusian Women* claims that the reality of Andalusian women's social status would enable a clear picture of their position without any obvious barriers or taboos by investigating women's poetry as proof of

their emancipation. Viguera strives to study the condition of women and their social roles in Al-Andalus history basing her perspective on Henri Peres who said that:

Andalusi women were not the prisoners Islamic rules would have us see in all Muslims... the clearest example of the female freedom in Muslim Spain is that of Wallada...her self-confident look, her disdain for the veil, her daring conversation and her sometimes eccentric attitudes show clearly that she had become free of many prejudices. She came under attack, naturally, but the very fact that she was allowed to lead such a life implies that Islam, so strict and rigid with regard to women, had singularly relaxed its rigour throughout al-Andalus, and we are compelled to admit that a more liberal concept of women's condition sprang from the atmosphere created by Christian customs. The level of female emancipation becomes still clearer when we add to the portrait of 'liberated woman', as seen in Wallada. (in Viguera 1992:711-12)

In Pierre Guichard's view with regard to the notion of "Liberalism" or "freedom of behavior", Wallada bint al-Mustakfi was among the Andalusi women who "hit the headlines" when it comes to delving into the history of Al-Andalus women and the free status they enjoyed (Guichard 1992:696). Therefore, any scholar attempting to investigate the connection between literature, particularly poetry, and the intricacies of individual social position has to examine the literature of Arab Andalusi like *muwashshaha*, *zajal*, and *maqama*. Furthermore, in such a great variety of accounts, Ali b. Ahmad b. Sa'id b. Hazm's *Tawq al-Hamama*, or "The Dove's Neck Ring" (1022-1027) depicted women's status as one of equality with men. Ibn Hazm also focused more on "understanding the special characteristics, psychology, and interests of women, and the many roles they played". (Giffen 1992: 432)

Thus, Kahf posed a great challenge to the Western perception of Muslim women, by using the historical significance and value of Andalusi women's history as an alternative to what has been constructed in relation to Muslim women in the modern day, as well as a way to resist the patriarchal order within the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States. Kahf also shows that Al-Andalus cultural identity and codes are marked by gender and she touches directly on questions of cultural memory in relation to women's history to recreate an individual and collective consciousness. Thus, there is a need to create a conversation to discuss Al-Andalus as cultural memory with regard to women's writing in the context of Al-Andalus history.

5. Conclusion

In a variety of ways, the narrative of Al-Andalus has multi-dimensional structures in the process of remembering and this can provide a valuable discourse through which cultural memory may be examined. Cultural memory, thus, is a most useful tool for decoding narrative techniques employed in Arab-American women's narratives. Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* ponders the sense of powerlessness which haunts the Arab reality in the modern era, using Al-Andalus as a source of cultural memory to establish a dialogue over time by re-visiting the historical past in order to resist a possible dystopian future. On the other hand, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* introduces the concept of cultural memory, linking it to different aspects of gender identity. In this sense, cultural memory bolsters knowledge and power in the process of reconstructing gender identity.

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