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Narrating the extremes: The language of suffering and survival in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*

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Abstract: *In the 16th century, the tragic Narvaez expedition to the New World ended with only four survivors: three Spaniard masters and a Moor slave who had never been given a chance to give his testimony as his companions had. In the fictional memoir *The Moor's Account* (2014), Laila Lalami gives voice to Mustafa/Estebanico to narrate the hardships they went through from his perspective, which reflects his Arabic and Islamic identity. His story depicts several forms of human suffering: deprivation and poverty in his home country Morocco under the Portuguese occupation, slavery and torment while in Spain, and eight years of privation and wandering in the wilderness of North America. The paper will employ postcolonial poetics to reveal the literary devices used to recount these forms of human suffering as they are represented through the ethnicity of the narrator. This in-text analysis will link linguistic and aesthetic signs in the text to their interpretative functions in cultural reconciliation. Therefore, it will highlight the ideological and aesthetic aspects which classify the novel as postcolonial writing. Then, it will focus on the suffering-survival dichotomy and its representation in the narrative discourse.*

Introduction

This paper will employ postcolonial poetics to unveil the artistic aspects of Laila Lalami's fictional memoir *The Moor's Account* (2014). It will reveal the literary devices used to construct a story which is conceptually bounded to North African and Islamic culture through focusing on

the lexical, structural and metaphoric forms of the text. Likewise, it will highlight poetic and stylistic patterns through which human suffering is depicted. Lalami is a Moroccan-American novelist and essayist. Besides *The Moor's Account*, she is the author of several fiction works: *Hope and other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), *Secret Son* (2009) and, *The Other Americans* (2019). She also writes essays about literary criticism, politics, culture and personal memoirs.

The Moor's Account is a counter-history of the original account of the Narvaez expedition to Florida in 1528. With the approval of the Spanish king, this expedition sailed across the Atlantic searching for gold. However, it dramatically ended with the death of 600 persons and the survival of only four: three Spaniard masters Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo, Andres de Dorantes and a Moroccan black slave, Estebanico. The Joint Report, written by Cabeza de Vaca, mentions the Moroccan slave on very few occasions; it does not reveal much information about him except that he is an "Arab Negro from Azamor" (Cabeza de Vaca, 2002, ch. 39).

Throughout the 25 chapters, Mustafa/Estebanico narrates the story of that expedition from his perspective, not only as an eyewitness, but also as participant in the action. This is quite logical because of his multilingual skills in Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish and later the language of the Indians, which enable him to be acquainted with several cultures. The story goes back and forth between Morocco and the New World. Born in Azemmur, Morocco, Mustafa learns Arabic and Portuguese. To support his poor family, he sells himself into bondage. He departs to Seville, renamed Estebanico, converted to Christianity, and sold to a brutal Spanish master. After five years, in 1528, his master gives him, in exchange for cumulative debts, to Señor Dorantes. He travels with his new master to Florida in an expedition of more than 600 persons.

Reaching the shore of Florida, the expedition is divided into two groups, those who sail with the five ships, and those who march a distance estimated as 20 leagues. They are supposed to meet again at the port of Pánuco. The sea group is never heard of again; whereas the land group goes through a series of hardships against misconception, wilderness, disease, and attacks from the Indians. These misfortunes end with the survival of only four men who move westward between Indian tribes as slaves and then as healers. After eight long years, they return to civilization when they reach New Spain (Mexico). However, after all the suffering he has undergone in the Land of the Indians, Mustafa finds himself a slave again unable to go back to his family. Eventually, he decides to deceive the Spaniards and goes back to live with the Indians.

This paper will employ postcolonial poetics, which claims that postcolonial fiction is not only an instrument for social change or a representation of geopolitical conditions. Fiction, be it postcolonial or not, is an aesthetic phenomenon that needs to be decoded. Jane Hiddleston argues that “[l]iterature is precisely not concerned with straightforward truth claims, nor with historical fact nor political argument, but uses poetic forms in such a way as to throw into question such truth claims ‘facts’ or arguments” (Hiddleston, 2011, p. 2). To postcolonial poetics, therefore, representation (structuring of the text) and interpretation (understanding of its aesthetics) are equally important. Thus, this paper will employ postcolonial poetics to reveal both aesthetic and ideological strategies through which *The Moor’s Account* reconciles North African and Islamic culture. Then, it will analyse the language used to depict human suffering and survival as major themes in postcolonial fiction.

***The Moor’s Account* as a postcolonial text**

From a contemporary standpoint, Lalami retells a historical account through the perspective of a North African narrator who was silenced in the original account. Therefore, the novel may be read as a counter-history that corrects and completes missing pieces about the historical character Estebanico. The original account erases the Arab slave from the making of action and abridges his existence as a page who follows his Spanish master. Neither being one of the only four survivors, nor sharing the same hardships in the wilderness as his companions, allow him to have recognition among them. And neither changing his name from Mustafa to Estebanico, nor converting from Islam to Christianity recommend him among European Christians. Here, “Lalami’s skill lies in giving Estebanico a voice and a different perspective from that expressed in Spanish accounts” (Lalami). Postcolonial critics find the novel a convenient narrative to explore themes of nostalgia (sense of belonging to roots and tradition) and diaspora (detachment from one’s country and its consequences on identity), as in Abdellah Elboubekri’s article (2016), where he investigates the way this novel employs diasporic memory to reconstruct history. A poetic reading, however, will reveal the aesthetic strategies (lexical, structural and metaphoric) used to reconstruct this history.

To start with, Lalami states in the copyright page that “this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locations is entirely coincidental”. Still in the same page, she notes that the book is shelved under “Cabeza de Vaca,

Alvar Nunez, Active 16th century-fiction,” or “American-discovery and exploration-Spanish-fiction.” This ambivalence in classifying the work as fictional and historical at the same time indicates up-coming figures of speech that link fiction to history. As then follows, Lalami uses a set of allegories to keep the story culture-bound but at the same time understood by the contemporary reader. In the prologue, Mustafa, the narrator, states that this narration is his testimony about the Narvaez expedition, which he has never been asked to deliver as his other three companions have. He tells the story from his perspective as an Arab, Berber and Muslim eyewitness. Thus, the novel may read as a set of ideologemes which are structured around ideas and beliefs of a certain culture (his North African, Arabic and Islamic culture). From this perspective, the story is better understood in the light of the arbitrary relationship between linguistic signifiers in the text (signs in the text) and their signifieds in the culture of the narrator (the ideologeme constituting these signs). Hence, the reader, who is addressed directly on several occasions through the course of the novel, is expected to decode the signs of the text, then reset them according to their cultural affiliations. “Only in this way can a novel be defined in its unity and/or as ideologeme” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 37).

As this might suggest, Lalami attempts to correct stereotypes of North African, and particularly Moroccan, culture. Such a stand is manifested in her other fiction and non-fiction works. She states:

I know now that it had something to do with reading work after work in which men of my race, culture, or religious persuasion were portrayed as singularly deviant, violent, backward, and prone to terrorism, while the women were depicted as silent, oppressed, helpless, and waiting to be liberated by the kind foreigner. (2009, p. 20)

This novel is no exception; it gives voice to the Moor Mustafa to tell the story from his perspective, not only as an eyewitness but also as a contributor in the event-making. Therefore, the lexical, structural, and metaphoric aspects of the story are structured around the narrator’s personal interpretations, religious beliefs and cultural judgments. Such an authority over the narration is justified by the role he plays in the survival of his group. In the introduction to *The Chronicle of the Narvaez Expedition*, Ilan Stavans mentions that the Spaniards appointed Estebanico as a mediator between them and the Indians to keep their superiority as masters (Cabeza de Vaca, 2002;

Lalami, 2016, p. 197). As the Spaniards see Estebanico as inferior to them and consider him a servant who takes orders, in contrast, he was the nexus that connected the surviving Spaniard with the Indians. He enjoys the advantages of the mediator who can communicate with both parties; he is the one in authority.

Once again, the lexical choices of the narrator involve a signifying process that should not be read outside the cultural background of the story. He employs terms associated with the North African, Arabic and Islamic culture of the 16th century. Lalami's talent lies in choosing words and expressions that are understood by contemporary readers while they are still themed in the 16th century and uttered by a narrator of North African ethnicity. For instance, the narrator imposes several Arabic words using the English alphabet such as: *msid* (mosque), *hijama* (cupping therapy), *Ifriqiya* (Africa), *hammam* (Turkish bath), *medina* (city), *fqih* (Quran teacher), etc. This lexical resistance is characteristic of counter-history writing. Moreover, the narrator uses a Muslim calendar to measure time, he likens his mother to Schaherazad from *Arabian Nights* because she loves to tell stories, he sarcastically compares his father to the brave Antara, he cites from the Prophetic Hadith, and he recounts events from the Islamic Conquests. As these details might suggest, he does not employ these aspects to challenge the contemporary Western reader, but rather to stress his ethnic identity which is silenced in the original account. After all, the aspects he uses are familiar to ordinary readers, and not restricted to literary scholars.

To answer a question about the structure of the novel, Lalami demonstrates that she wrote the story "in the form of an Arabic travelogue, organized in individual stories" (2016, p. 197). Such kind of writing is characterized by intensive use of description of what the traveller witnesses in the places he passes by. The detailed description takes over the narration of events. Travelogues were famous among explorers in the Middle Ages such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun in the Arab World and Marco Polo in Europe. In this token, Mustapha describes in detail the nature around him from his home town Azummor in Morocco to Seville in Spain, and from the shores of Florida to New Spain. This literary strategy is not only used to enable the reader to construct the landscape of the story, but also, and more importantly, to resist the fact that he is regarded as a mere slave who follows in his master's footsteps. In and through his narration, Mustafa/Estebanico enjoys a certain freedom and authority that allow him to interpret the events and build his own sense of the nature that surrounds him. Lalami justifies that her "primary interest was to hear a character whose

voice has been suppressed. I didn't think of him as embodying anyone else's story but his own" (2016, p. 197).

Further inquiry into the character of Mustafa/Estebanico shows that even his physical appearance, which he inherits from his race, differentiates him from both the Spaniards and Indians. His dark skin colour is a signifier of this difference. During one of the attacks, Mustafa has to wrestle with an Indian; the latter hesitates for a while when he recognizes that Mustapha is different from the other Spaniards. Because of this hesitation, Mustafa wins the fight. Keeping this emphasis, Mustafa shows that his perspective is built on his identity as a well-educated Muslim born and raised in an Islamic country. For example, he starts the story with *Basmalah*: "In the name of God, most compassionate, most merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of worlds, and prayers and blessings be on our prophet Muhammad and upon all his progeny and companions" (2014, p. Prologue). Originally, this phrase is recited before every verse in the Quran, and then became a norm to start any piece of writing. On another occasion, he refers to wine as "the forbidden drink" and confesses that he is forced to serve it. But he comforts himself with the worth of telling the truth; "I have decided in this relation to tell everything that happened to me, so I must not leave out even such a detail" (2014, ch. 1). Later in the novel, when he realizes that they had been wandering the wilderness for eight long years, he comments, "I felt like one of the People of the Cave, awakening after many years of slumber into another world, a world they no longer knew" (2014, ch. 18). In sum, to receive the satisfaction desired from this account, the reader has to view it through the ethnicity of its narrator. From this perception rises another observation related to the depiction of human suffering in the 16th-century setting and its representation by an ethnic narrator.

The language of suffering

In this section, postcolonial poetics will be employed to reveal the relation between the poetic effects and the narrator's ethnicity in depicting human suffering. As the novel progresses, the poetic effects underline different levels of human suffering. These effects include various forms of semantic, structural and metaphoric aspects which represent suffering experienced or witnessed by the narrator. The concept of suffering, as a major theme in postcolonial fiction, "has become synonymous with physical or moral hardship" (Cassin, 2014, p. 1097). Seen in this light, characters in the novel face a series of hardships caused by other people or by nature. Through his ethnic perspective, the narrator depicts several forms of this suffering such as: injustice, hunger,

sexual abuse, slavery, disease and starvation. In representing this suffering, he implicitly uses a set of literary devices and aesthetic strategies. For instance, early in the prologue, the narrator informs the reader that out of 600 people in the expedition, only four survive; thus, throughout the novel, fatalities will be announced rather than unexpectedly occur. Beyond the narrative level, revealing such tragic information in the beginning shifts the reader's attention from the story as a set of events to the structure of narrative, from who dies to how he dies.

In the course of his memoir, the narrator retells real and imagined stories he heard from his mother or from storytellers in the *souq* of Barbary. These stories may be read as allegories of the hardships he experiences and witnesses in the New World. Some allegories represent the victims' wounds and misery, while others weave a lifeline for survival. In one case, by the time of disembarking on the shore of Florida, Narvaez had ordered the expedition to split into two groups: one sailing with the ships and the other marching on foot. The two groups are supposed to rendezvous at the port of Pánuco. Mustafa, then, recalls a story from the Islamic Conquests; "seven centuries earlier, Tariq ibn Ziyad had burned his boats on the shores of Spain," but he comforts himself that Narvaez "was only sending the ships to wait for us at the nearest port, where they could resupply" (2014, ch. 1). However, the land expedition would never hear of the ships again; as if, as in the story he recalls, they were burned on the shore of Florida the day the expedition split. Such deliberate use of allegory in his account, albeit convenient when writing about history because of the latter's ability to repeat itself, manifests his identity as a Muslim from Morocco. Also, and most importantly, it reflects the violent silence imposed on him because of his position as a black slave.

Another form of human suffering is represented in the concept of silence. In the novel, wounded characters are forced to keep silent in fear of further punishment. In most cases, silence is the only option despite the pain. Therefore, silence may be read as a symbol of suffering; characters keep silent during violations that they cannot respond to in words or in actions. In the scene of his birth, Mustafa's father loses his arm because of an attack by a Portuguese soldier. Witnessing this violation, his mother cannot cry in her labour despite the pain; "she said that she did not cry, that the violence that had been visited on my father had silenced her pain" (2014, ch. 2). Ironically, however, his father loses his arm because he challenges the Portuguese soldiers in the first place; he chooses to speak instead of keeping silent.

Another scene depicts the silence of both the tortured victim and the witness during and after a violation. In his years as a slave in Spain, Mustafa witnesses the rape of a female slave named Ramatullai. Once again, silent suffering characterizes the violation. During the sexual abuse, Mustafa makes eye contact with Ramatullai:

The silent gaze between us spoke of our disbelief. Every slave knew this could happen, but no slave believed it would, until it did. Pain, anger, and rebellion bubbled inside us. But in the end fear won out; she turned her face away and I lowered my eyes and returned to my closet. (2014, ch. 10)

Even after the incident, they never bring up the subject. Silence remains the only consolation for their pain; “Ramatullai did not speak of the violations she endured, and I did not bring them up, but the image tortured me that night and many nights to come” (2014, ch. 10). In another scene, the narrator wisely keeps himself silent and invisible to avoid violation. When he finds a nugget, which is thought to be of the gold the expedition is looking for, his master takes the credit even though it is Mustafa who found it; still he comments “I have to remain quiet, make myself unnoticed for a while, let him bask, alone, in the glory of the find” (2014, ch. 1).

Perhaps, illness is the most discussed theme when it comes to human suffering. However, in this novel, it is not addressed only for its thematic and moralistic function but also for its rhetorical effects. Illness, fever in particular, is used to justify several deaths; yet, the reader is unable to conceive of the kind of suffering these men experience. Because the narrator does not provide an elaborate description of sick men. This shift from the thematic to the rhetorical effect of illness is used to highlight the hardships the four survivors experience throughout their journey. After many helpless accounts against fever, which kept stealing the souls of their companions, the four survivors become respected and well-known healers among the Indian tribes. This juxtaposition suggests that the four survivors did not become healers because they knew something about medicine – if they did, they would have nursed their companions – they are forced to become healers to survive and to travel in peace around the Indian tribes.

In keeping with forms of suffering, if there is only one common theme discussed in colonial and postcolonial writing, it would be slavery, and this novel is no exception. Narrated by a slave, the story depicts many torments and violations practised against slaves in the 16th century in three

different places: North Africa, Europe and the New World. Violations against slaves are both physical and moral, and in most cases, they cause equal impact on them. It is early in the 15th century that the European man started to treat people of other races and religions as inferiors. After the fall of Granada, Muslims and Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. Many of them fled to North African countries. And those who remained in Spain were treated as slaves. The narrator witnesses that Andalusians and Moors are marked with tattoos on their cheeks to be distinguished as “esclavo” (‘slave’); however, such torment is not required for those with dark skin as if “the color of their skin...is a sign in itself” (2014, ch. 8). Likewise, after falling into bondage, the narrator describes the ordeal of losing his name:

When I fell into slavery, I was forced to give up not just my freedom, but also the name that my mother and father had chosen for me. A name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world. Losing it meant losing my ties to all those things too. So I had never been able to shake the feeling that this Estebanico was a man conceived by the Castilians, quite different from the man I really was. (2014, ch. 1)

Besides losing his name, the narrator resists attachment of any kind with what surrounds him to avoid potential emotional shock. After living in Seville for five years, the narrator has to leave with his new master to Florida. He recounts the last view of the city from the port:

As I pulled on the knotted rope, I looked at the city before me. During my time in Seville, I had tried my best not to grow attached to anything—not to the tools that dangled from my belt when I worked in the store, not to the lentils in my bowl at night; not to the sound of the water fountain in the patio when I woke, nor to the soft glow of the afternoon sun on the Alcazar. Above all, I had tried my best not to love. (2014, ch. 10)

This defensive attitude prevents him from building a relationship with anything or anyone, because he knows that, as a slave, he has no control over his life.

However, resisting attachment does not prevent Mustafa from feeling sympathy for those who suffer. While in Spain, he has a friendship with the other female slave in the house,

Ramatullai. They share stories of their day work and memories from their countries. He comforts her that she will one day find her daughter and she comforts him that he will see his family. Time passes with them sharing their hopeful wishes for each other. He recounts:

Ramatullai lived up to her name; she was a blessing from God, for she was the only friend I had in that household, the only one I could speak to, the only one who shared the pain of exile and servitude with me. When the master whipped me for breaking a pot, she rubbed butter over my lash marks; when the mistress abruptly cut off all of Ramatullai's hair, I said she looked better without it. (2014, ch. 10)

Once again, in the land of the Indians, Mustafa feels sympathy towards Indian hostages who face frequent torture by Narvaez to deliver information they do not know. Narvaez wants to know the location of the Kingdom of Gold, while the Indian hostages not only do not know the location, but they do not understand his language. Ironically, no gold is found in the end. Witnessing one of the whipping sessions, Mustafa describes his feeling:

I knew what it was like to be whipped, to protest, to proclaim one's innocence only to be whipped with greater fury, and to find that the beatings subside only in the face of complete and unquestioning surrender. On my neck, I still had a scar made by the heel of my first owner, a man everyone in Seville regarded as kind and devout and generous. Señor Dorantes had not beaten me, but that did not mean that he would not start—all it meant was that I had managed to avoid his ire thus far. (2014, ch. 3)

Mustafa states that slavery is associated with suffering regardless of a master's morals. His first master is a good nobleman; yet, he used to whip him mercilessly. Ironically, at the beginning in the port of Azemmur, Mustafa sells himself into slavery as a solution to end his family's ordeal. As the novel progresses, he recognizes that slavery generates only suffering. There is a point where he feels that his new master would treat him as a fellow human being, but this is due to the harsh circumstances imposed on both of them; "but over the last eight years, he [his master Dorantes] and I had shared so much danger and so many hardships that our relationship had been transformed. A feeling of fellowship, which not have existed between us on that raft bound us together now"

(2014, ch. 18). This illusion, however, fades away as soon as they get back to civilization among other Spaniards. They return to play the role of a master and slave again; “I wanted to ask him why, but I did not wish to press him and thus turn him against me, so I kept silent. Years ago, silence had been my refuge, and now I sought its shelter again” (2014, ch. 20). Not only does his master return to treating him as a slave, but so does the whole community. And it is the same reason for which he is not asked to deliver his testimony. He comments, “of all the humiliations I had endured in the Land of the Indians, this was the hardest one for me, because I had been entirely innocent of the charge and because the word Leon had used—slave—had revived a pain that I had been trying to bury”. (2014, ch. 14)

Another poetic style used to depict human suffering in the novel is the symbolic image. Symbols are used to signify violations of the perpetrator against the victim. The signs used have no arbitrary relation to the concepts they stand for. They have to be read in the context of the story and through the figurative expressions of the narrator. For example, the flag becomes the symbolic reference to military victory on several occasions in the novel. Therefore, it is a sign that stands for the supremacy of the conqueror and humiliation of the conquered. In one scene, while disembarking on the shore of Florida, the Spaniards raise their flag high in the middle of the Indian village. This action reminds Mustafa of a similar scene of the Portuguese conquest in Azemmur:

I was reminded of the moment, many years earlier, when the flag of the Portuguese king was hoisted over the fortress tower in Azemmur. I had been only a young boy then, but I still lived with the humiliation of that days, for it had changed my family’s fate, disrupted our lives, and cast me out of my home. Now, halfway across the world, the scene was repeating itself on a different stage, with different people. So I could not help feeling a sense of dread at what was yet to come. (2014, ch. 1)

Later in their march to Apalache, when the expedition faces a group of Indians, they raise a flag high to manifest their power, even if the Indians do not recognize such a sign. By the same token, if the flag is lowered, it becomes a symbol of distress. A small group led by Señor Castillo comes back from their mission of checking on the ships with disappointment. Mustafa notices that “in the hands of the young soldier, the flagpole leaned sideways, as if he no longer had the strength to hold it upright” (2014, ch. 5). The association of one symbol with two different interpretations,

depending on the position of the perpetrator or the victim, is a proof that the linguistic sign cannot be read outside its narrative context.

Ongoing with the discussion, dehumanization is another form of human suffering. It is to categorize certain groups of people as less human because of their race, identity or ethnicity, and then to permit abuses and violations against them. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who calls such practice part of a “genocide continuum”, writes: “The [genocide] continuum refers to the human capacity to reduce others to nonpersons, to monsters, or to things, that give structure, meaning, and rationale to everyday practices of violence” (qtd. In Nayar, 2015, XV). In the novel, this “genocide continuum” is represented through white men’s behaviour towards Indians. Spaniards recognize Indians as less than human “savages”; they permit themselves to take their belongings, to rape their women, and torture them in any way possible. For example, some of them grow their beards only to tease the Indians who could not. In one scene, the governor orders the whipping of four Indian hostages, just because they are not answering his questions, which is in a language they do not understand (2014, ch. 1). In another scene, the governor brings the hammer down on an Indian’s little finger. “Howling with pain, the man yanked his hand, but the soldiers restrained him and put it back down on the ground. The shattered nail oozed blood, and the knuckle was broken” (2014, ch. 3). As illustrated in this section, various artistic and poetic styles (such as: allegory, metaphor, symbolic images and juxtaposition) are used to represent several forms of human suffering (physical pain, illness, slavery and dehumanization). By this point, there is a need to investigate the use of these poetic styles to narrate the other extreme: survival.

The language of survival

With this much conceded, it should be admitted that the novel is not a tragic story; it is not enclosed in the notion of human suffering. Rather, it is a realistic narrative that contains both suffering and survival accounts. In making this case, the narrator employs literary devices and poetic styles similar to those he uses to depict human suffering. Still, an interpretation of these poetic and rhetorical aspects is connected to the narrator’s ethnic perspective. To survive, Mustafa relies on the notion of suffering in his native culture, which is considered as an ordeal that must end at a certain time, and he will be rewarded if he holds out. He reminds himself:

It was hard to escape the feeling that our journey was doomed. Sitting on the riverbank afterward, my limbs trembling despite the crackling fire, I began to wonder whose turn would come next. And when would mine be? In two days? Three? A week? And yet, at the same time, I tried to tell myself that no, this was it—this had to be—the final test. I had gone through enough. I would be found innocent of whatever evil we were all being punished for, I would reach Pánuco soon, I would return home. I would be saved. (2014, ch. 13)

Wishing for a better future, he keeps reading signs around him to maintain his sense of hope and survival. He recounts, “Beside me, a beetle was trying to carry a crumb back to its nest, working slowly and patiently, undaunted by how far it was from its goal. The longer I watched it, the more my despair receded. I had to survive, I told myself, if not for me, then for the sake of all those I had left at home” (2014, ch. 13). In another occasion, he likens characters’ hope to someone “watching a clear sky and trying to guess when it would rain” (2014, ch. 10). Still in another, he reminds himself of a saying of his ancestors, “a living dog is better than a dead lion”, to keep silent when he disagrees with his master (2014, ch. 1). The literary impact of using such metaphors is to stress the seriousness of the ordeal and to contrast it with humans’ innate desire to survive.

Keeping with this emphasis, the notion of memory is used at structural and functional levels. In forming the novel, the chapters are sequenced between the present and the past. Still, taken as a whole, the novel is a personal memoir based on what the narrator can remember; such memorial accounts are postcolonial writing par excellence. From a functional perspective, memories and daydreams are used to confront characters’ suffering. Despite his troubles in the New World, Mustafa keeps pushing bad thoughts away. He recounts, “whenever these thoughts came to me, I shuffled them like a deck of cards with less painful memories, hoping, somehow, to lose them forever” (2014, ch. 10). True, in the time of suffering, he recalls his happy childhood days back in Azemmur where he was full of hope and ambition to be a rich man. Even though his childhood days contradict his present state as a silenced slave, Mustafa uses his memories to maintain his hope for survival and freedom. In the course of tragic events, his hope and persistence help him to survive. He states:

At night, when everyone settled down to sleep, I watched the peerless evening skies or listened to the crickets singing to their mates. In this way, I taught myself to savor what joy was within my reach. The world was not what I wished it to be, but I was alive. I was alive. I set my mind to surviving my trials, which would end soon enough, delivering me only to the eternity of death. (2014, ch. 15)

Ever seeking freedom, Mustafa hopes to be free when the expedition reaches Apalache, when it turns out that there is no such Kingdom of Gold, he shifts the destination to New Spain. There, again, he realizes that his master would not set him free. Eventually, he decides to deceive the Spaniards and go back to live with the Indians, where he enjoys a certain amount of freedom.

Significantly, beliefs and rituals from his native culture enable him to endure several ordeals he faces in the New World. He connects the thirst he has in the journey in the Land of the Indians to the thirst he used to feel during Ramadan back in Morocco. While quenching his thirst he remembers:

After he was thirsty for a long time “I dropped on my knees, tipped the container, and drank and drank and drank until my stomach began to ache. It was the same kind of pain I used to get when I broke the fast on the first night of Ramadan, a feeling of being at once satiated and yet still thirsty. An odd feeling, but not altogether unfamiliar, and it made me dizzy. I felt down on the pelts to rest, allowing myself at last to look around me properly”. (2014, ch. 11)

Once again, while practising healing, he relies on alternative treatments he learnt from his mother or witnessed in the *souq* of Azemmur. On one occasion he practises Islamic Prophetic medicine (cupping therapy) on an Indian patient even though he was only a boy when he witnessed this treatment. He narrates:

I could do nothing to help this man and now I was certain that I would be blamed if I failed. But with the clarity of mind that comes at such fraught moments, I remembered how, years before, in the market of Azemmur, my father had gone to the hijama tent, complaining from similar pains. I had seen a cupping cure

performed on him that day and, although I had no experience with it myself, I felt I had no choice but to try it. (2014, ch. 16)

The novel also addresses the relation between longing for survival and storytelling as a rhetorical aspect. In light of this, stories may be considered as cultural and social remedies. They can depict suffering as they can ease and relieve the human body. Arthur Frank claims that individuals grasp the content and structure of stories from their cultural surrounding; “The ill body’s articulation in stories is a personal task, but the stories told by the ill are also *social*... The shape of the telling is molded by all the rhetorical expectations that the storyteller has been internalizing ever since he first heard some relative describe an illness...” (1995, p. 3). Likewise, Mustafa relies on stories which he heard from his mother or in the *souq* of Barbary to cure cases that he otherwise cannot. He recounts:

If I was confronted with an illness I did not recognize, I listened to the sick man or woman and offered consolation in the guise of a long story. After all, what the sufferers needed most of all was an assurance that someone understood their pain and that, if not a full cure, at least some respite from it lay further ahead. This, too, was something I had learned in the markets of Azemmur: a good story can heal. (2014, ch. 16)

Like all storytellers across cultures, Mustafa learnt how to tell a good story from his native Morocco. “From their families and friends, from the popular culture that surrounds them, and from the stories of other ill people, storytellers have learned formal structures of narrative, conventional metaphors and imagery, and standards of what is and is not appropriate to tell” (Frank, 1995, p. 3). As illustrated in this quote, Mustafa knows that a good story can heal:

The memory of the traveling healer in the souq of Azemmur returned to me all of a sudden. Every market day, he set up his large, black tent, where he told stories and healed the sick, providing spectacle and service all at once. Though I had traveled far from Barbary, I had come across a similar tradition in the Land of Corn. And I found comfort in it... this time, I was not surprised, because I had seen how

a good cure, combined with just the right story and little showmanship, could restore anyone's spirits. (2014, ch. 17).

In sum, the narrator carefully balances between suffering and survival. However, he does so not through depicting equal scenes of pain and hope but rather through employing similar poetic patterns to narrate these extremes.

Conclusion

Drawing together these critical observations shows that postcolonial poetics is a suitable approach to reading Lalami's *The Moor's Account* because of its equal emphasis on representation and interpretation. From one perspective, the novel addresses various postcolonial themes such as: reconciliation of Berber and Islamic cultures, suffering of ethnic and minority groups, slavery, and dehumanization. From an artistic perspective, the narration employs several poetic styles such as: lexical choices, structural forms, metaphors, symbolism, allegories and rhetoric. Lalami's talent as a writer lies in her capacity to bring literary practices and political writing closer. The novel emerges from a specific political context; yet, its aesthetic strategies give it a literary quality and distinguish it from other forms of writing. Such a combination makes *The Moor's Account* a complete work of art that can be experienced as a political discourse and an appreciated source of aesthetic satisfaction at the same time.

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