

Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account: A Lost Narrative*

Sanaila Ghufan

Research Scholar

Department of English

Maulana Azad National Urdu University,

Lucknow Campus

Lucknow, India

sanailaghufan.rs@manuu.edu.in

Abstract

From the earlier times the voices of the minorities especially the Muslims have been subjugated by the forces. Many of the texts written in the olden times, whether fictional or non-fictional hardly have any mention of Muslims in them. One such text being the historical account of the Narvaez expedition that took place in 1527, which was chronicled by Cabeza de Vaca, one of the four survivors of the expedition. What is surprising is that one of the survivors was an African slave, Estabanico but he is hardly mentioned in the original, despite being part of the expedition that stretched to eight year. Fast forward to the 21st century which is the age of postcolonialism and where the once oppressed communities are finally speaking about their truth, Moroccan author, Laila Lalami through her novel, *The Moor's Account* decided to give voice and a backstory to the African slave, Estabanico. The current paper deals with the complexities of the novel and tries to provide reasons as to why Cabeza de Vaca intentionally omitted the Estabanico's account of the travels. The paper also discusses the ingenuine use of narrative tools made by the author in the retelling of the story

of a forgotten Muslim slave. It also narrates the importance of women characters in the Islamic culture of those days, when the western woman was not as liberated as she is today. Lastly, the paper draws a parallel between Estabanico's condition during the expedition and that of the Muslim population in the post 9/11 world.

Keywords: Subjugation, Islam, Backstory, Feminism, 9/11, Colonialism.

'The Moor's Account' by Moroccan writer Laila Lalami, published in the year 2014 and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction 2015, presents the fictional story of a non-fictional character, named Mustafa nee Estabanico (name given to him by his Spanish owners after being baptized). The first mention of Mustafa can be found in the official historical records about 'The Narvaez Expedition', which took place in the 16th century. In 1527, King Charles I of Spain appointed Pánfilo de Narváez to bring the territory of Florida under the king's rule but the expedition proved to be a disaster. After being stranded in Florida, Narváez and his men did everything they could to survive the harsh climate and the constant attacks by the natives but only four of the castaways managed to reach a Spanish settlement in Mexico. The survivors were Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, and Dorantes' enslaved Moor Estabanico.

The chronicle written by Cabeza de Vaca, contains only a few lines which mention Mustafa. The rest of Mustafa's story about being a slave, or how he managed to survive the entire journey with the others while being the only Muslim among the expeditioners has never been accounted for.

The fact that the expedition's chronicler chose to dedicate only a few lines to a man who had been with them through the ups and downs of the journey speaks volume about the treatment of Muslims in those days. There can be a number of reasons why Cabeza omitted Mustafa's contribution to their survival story, one being that maybe he was their slave and

was not considered at par with the other survivors, who were officials of various ranks or that his skin was different or because of the prejudices against his former religion, Islam, the reason could be any.

A person whose story of being stranded on an unknown island for nearly eight years, being caught between his Spanish owners and the untrusting natives of the island, has to be a thrilling one but it has been largely ignored all these years. Thus, Lalami ventures to correct the original account penned by Cabeza, where he has altered the true happenings of the expedition to suit the likes of the bishops, the royals and the King. She provides him with a name and an identity, he is Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori, a slave from the Moroccan town of Azemmur. The novel is an endeavour to reproduce the fictional life of the forgotten Moroccan slave, and also believed to be one of the first Africans to reach the land, presently known as The United States.

As an introduction to the novel Lalami has presented a preface to her novel from the protagonist Mustafa's point of view, where he directly addresses his readers and provides reasons for the culmination of this work. Through Mustafa it is actually Lalami who is voicing her own reason for writing this novel. Mustafa is quoted as saying –

I intend to correct details of the history that was compiled by my companions.
(Lalami, 3)

Lalami provides a detailed account of her protagonist's life and his character; how he became a slave, his life before and after slavery, the ill-fated expedition and the various characters he comes across throughout his life.

A remark in the British online newspaper, *Independent*, about Lalami's work describes the protagonist as -

The Moor is of course an outsider to both parties – the colonialists and the indigenous peoples. Lalami thus overcomes the great difficulty of historical fiction:

how to tell a story objectively without viewing it through modern eyes. Here, Estevanico holds the balance, and Lalami hauntingly evokes his reminiscences of a lost, loving family and a religion he has nominally been forced to abandon. He must eventually turn to one or another of the two cultures between which he moves, though his memories of an earlier life sustain him throughout his sufferings.¹

The novel is a first-person narrative, where we find the modest slave, as the narrator of the story. The novel portrays the various aspects of colonialism: rape, racism, forced conversions, brutality. Apart from this, the story has much more to offer to its readers.

When the expedition takes a turn; the group is taken as prisoners by the natives, the generals were reduced to the status of the humble slave, Mustafa. They were made to sleep together, work for their food and even suffer the same punishments by their captors, for trespassing.

It is the excellent use of literary techniques by Lalami which makes the novel an authentic account of a 16th century man. In an online interview with Kate Macdonald (2015) Lalami herself points out that –

I tried to imagine what a slave from Azemmour who'd attended Quranic school and wanted to write a travelogue in the style of the era would sound like. So, I relied solely on my ear. But while revising, I was quite deliberate in the lexical choices I made. I had to make sure that the nouns and verbs I used dated back to the sixteenth century, yet were also still in common usage today. I was aiming for a very specific effect: to have a voice that sounded authentic, but wasn't too formal or literal.²

Lalami being a professor of creative writing has used her expertise thoroughly in her work. She has beautifully described the elements of nature which the protagonist comes across in the strange new land. She writes about the natives' closeness with nature and the

harsh weather conditions faced by the expeditioners. In Lalami's novel, nature favours those with pure intentions. The natives lived in the lap of nature and it rewarded them but the expeditioners whose sole purpose was to take over the land, were met with violent storms, ferocious winds, heavy rains and other natural calamities, which reduced their numbers drastically. Despite being on the same piece of land, nature treated the two groups differently. The one who honoured nature was rewarded and the other who intended to harm or take over it, faced its wrath.

Also, the slave narrative provides substantial insight to the readers about Mustafa's life both before and after becoming a slave. There are various references to slavery, like, when we see Mustafa dealing in slave trade in the early days of his life in Azemmur later when he himself becomes a slave in order to sustain his family during the famine that struck his region.

An important literary technique used by Lalami is the varied timelines in the novel. The novel switches between two timelines: one being Mustafa's past, in his hometown and the other, in the present, during the ill-fated journey. The subtle transformation between the past and the present, illustrates Lalami's creative abilities. Mustafa reminiscing his past in his hometown, Azemmur is agonizing and helps in the overall development of his character. He ponders over his familial life, the poor choices which he made that landed him in his current position and what ever became of his family, specially his younger twin brothers, Yahya and Yusuf, whom he had not seen for years.

She has paid special attention to the Islamic as well as Spanish cultures. The dates mentioned throughout the novel are according to, the Julian as well as the Hegira calendar. Mustafa keeping account of the days according to the Hegira, whereas the Spanish kept tabs according to the Julian calendar. With this Lalami has given importance to both the cultures,

equally. In the initial chapter when Mustafa is set to embark on the life-changing journey, he mentions –

It was the year 934 of the Hegira, the thirtieth year of my life, the fifth year of my bondage.

(Lalami, 5)

Throughout the adversities, Mustafa remained faithful to his religion despite being renamed and converted to Christianity. He often addressed himself as ‘a servant of God’, reminding his readers time and again that some of his actions that he took throughout his life, like, dealing in slave trade, serving wine (the forbidden drink) to his master, or lying, were the cost of his survival. He even tried to hold onto his prayers, mostly in the darkness of the night while the others were asleep. But he was forced to give this task up, as it became tougher with each passing day for his prayers to go unnoticed by his master. We witness Mustafa directly addressing his readers and saying –

“Reader, it is not easy for me to confess that I served the forbidden drink, but I have decided in this relation to tell everything that happened to me, so I must not leave out even such a detail.” (Lalami, 15)

These lines clearly portray the guilt Mustafa felt on trespassing his religion’s rules but it is also evident that he had no choice in the given situation. The author in giving a voice to a forgotten Muslim also exerts the importance of Islam in his life.

Lalami treads upon various aspects of the protagonist’s life, she tries her best to present to her readers a round character, which is an important part thing if one is writing about and giving a backstory to a character. She writes about his early days, his adulthood, spirituality, the people in his life. She also talks about the women in Mustafa’s life. Their contribution to his life is undeniable and an interesting part of the novel.

From the beginning of Mustafa’s life, we see how he was always enthralled by the women in his life. First, it was his mother, Heniya, who instilled in him, qualities of empathy

and compassion. In fact, she was the one who taught him the skills which helped him survive the doomed expedition. The stories she often told him, proved to be fruitful on his journey in the New World. He used the art of story-telling to soothe many of his patients, when he worked as a healer amongst the natives. Like his mother, Mustafa also believed that –A good story can heal.²³¹

For his mother, Mustafa once remarked –

All I knew was that the weight on my chest no longer felt heavy, because my mother's stories always entertained me, by so doing, soothed me. (Lalami, 54)

Further in the novel, we come across Ramatullai the slave who was purchased by Mustafa's former owner, Bernardo Rodriguez, as a maid for his wife. Mustafa and Ramatullai spent their days toiling for their masters and at night would sit together for dinner and share their sorrows with each other. Ramatullai or Elena, a name given to her after she was sold as slave and was baptised. She was the sole friend and probably his first love during the days in Seville, at his brutal owner's house. She was the reason Mustafa bared the brutality of his owner because he didn't want to leave her alone in the horrid place. Ramatullai taught him the virtues of patience and companionship. Had it not been for her, Mustafa would have given up and ran away. It was her friendship that made him stay. Mustafa described her as –

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, (Lalami, 142)

During the latter half of the novel, we come across Oyomasot, the resilient, native wife of Mustafa and the daughter of the village chief, where Mustafa worked as a healer. Oyomasot provided the courage Mustafa needed in times of peril. She was the reason why Mustafa, after years of slavery, decided to break-free from it. He devises a plan at the end of the novel, so that he and his pregnant wife could escape from the Spanish rule and lead a free

life. The important women figure of the novel help Mustafa to become an able and complete man and extend their support at every step of his life.

Lalami's novel is equally significant in the contemporary times too because a parallel can easily be drawn between the experiences of the protagonist, Mustafa and that of Muslims in the present times. The protagonist in this novel can be said to be a representative of the entire Muslim community. The harsh experiences of the protagonist parallel the challenges faced by Muslims in contemporary times. Analysing the current situation of the Muslims in the world and the existing stereotypes levied against them which are mostly Western concepts, it would be appropriate to point out that Mustafa's troubles inflicted on him by his white oppressors is quite similar to the witch-hunt endorsed by the western countries against Muslims. Earlier, Muslims were fanatics, backward, indulgent, uneducated. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, this image worsened. The language used by the press in many articles related to the 9/11 or any other terrorist attacks, for Muslims often contained negative connotations. The West, it seems, has always dominated how Muslims are viewed across the world.

A research study by professor Justin Lewis and other on the role of media and the image of Muslims, from the university of Cardiff, states that—

The language used about British Muslims reflects the negative or problematic contexts in which they tend to appear. Four of the five most common discourses used about Muslims in the British press associate Islam/Muslims with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values. By contrast, only 2% of stories contained the proposition that Muslims supported dominant moral values. Similarly, the most common nouns used in relation to British Muslims were terrorist, extremist, Islamist, suicide bomber and militant with very few positive nouns (such as 'scholar') used. The most common adjectives used were radical, fanatical, fundamentalist, extremist

and militant, suggesting that we see far more references to more threatening versions of Islam than to moderate Islam. (Lewis, 28)

The image of Muslims created in the media after the 9/11 attacks closely resembles Mustafa's life that Lalami presents in the novel. It is observed that, Mustafa's fate is always prescribed by his Spanish owners, even when he is their ally. During the expedition, he is their slave and is treated accordingly and after the suffering misfortunes during the expedition, they become allies. The ranks diminish and the slave-master relationship ceases to exist. But as soon the survivors re-join Spanish settlement, Mustafa is again demoted to a slave, despite of all they went through together. His destiny was never in his own hands, either at the beginning of the novel or towards the end. Thus, a parallel between Mustafa's life and the current situation of the Muslims of the world can be drawn because all these generalisations whether pre or post 9/11, are creations of the West. Likewise, even in the current times, it is the West with its literature and media in a way, that has a dominant say in how the entire world views the Muslim community.

'The Moor's Account' takes the reader through the experiences of the Muslim slave, Mustafa. We learn about his constant efforts to lead a peaceful life in an unsupportive world. He strives to attain a sense of identity, in a world, which is constantly questioning him and his beliefs.

Likewise, islamophobia and hate crimes against the Muslim community have risen to such an extent that Muslims today have to resort to various ways of escaping the consequences. They are forced to change their appearances in order to fit into this world. In some parts of the world, women are even forced to take off their veils in order to hide their religious identity.

A 2016 report in The New York Times stated that –

Hate crimes against American Muslims have soared to their highest levels since the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. New data from researchers at California State University, San Bernardino, found that hate crimes against American Muslims were up 78 percent over the course of 2015. Attacks on those perceived as Arab rose even more sharply.

There were numerous reports that suggested that hate crimes against Muslims rose considerably post 9/11 as the entire Muslim population was held responsible for the crimes committed by a few. The world image of Muslims deteriorated to its worse as they were held to be responsible for the September 11 calamity. Likewise, it is observed that in the novel *Mustafa* too was often wary of the consequences he will have to face if his owner suffered any loss in his any of their endeavours, as he would always be held responsible for his owner's failures. With these instances it is clear that *Mustafa's* troubles parallel with the current situation of Muslims of the world.

It seems perhaps that Lalami's purpose of writing this novel and giving a name and a story to an unknown Muslim from the past, is her way of creating awareness about the experiences of a Muslim in a non-Muslim world. Thus, it will not be imprecise to say that Lalami's protagonist is an apt representative of the Muslim community.

Works Cited

Books

Lalami, Laila. *The Moor's Account: A Novel.*, 2014. Print. p.3.

Ibid. p. 5

Ibid. p. 15.

Ibid. p. 54.

Ibid. p. 142.

Ibid. p. 231.

Websites

“Debunking Stereotypes About Muslims and Islam.” *Teaching Tolerance*,

www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/debunking-stereotypes-about-muslims-and-islam

Hellyer, H A. “West Had Different Relations with Muslims and Islam in the Past.” *The National*, The National, 4 Mar. 2017, www.thenational.ae/opinion/west-had-different-relations-with-muslims-and-islam-in-the-past-1.38810.

¹Jakeman, Jane. *The Moor's Account* by Laila Lalami, book review: A remarkable tale of old-world greed. *Independent.co.uk.*, 27 August 2015.

²Kate. “Interview with Laila Lalami, Author of *The Moor's Account*.” *Kate Macdonald*, 21 Aug. 2015, katemacdonald.net/2015/08/21/interview-with-laila-lalami-author-of-the-moors-account/.

Lichtblau, Eric. “Hate Crimes Against American Muslims Most Since Post-9/11 Era.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/hate-crimes-american-muslims-rise.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Moore K., Mason P, Lewis J., *Images of Islam in the UK: Representation of British Muslims in the National Print Media 2000-2008*, 2008, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. p. 28.

“Stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in the United States.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 15 Dec. 2018,
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_Arabs_and_Muslims_in_the_United_States.

“The Narváez Expedition.” *Interpreting the Territories of the Coastal Natives Described by Cabeza De Vaca*, www.texascounties.net/articles/discovery-of-texas/narvaezexpedition.htm.