

Winners and Losers: Morocco's Market Liberalization and Contemporary Cultural Representations

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Moroccan novelist Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) and *Secret Son* (2009) demonstrate that Morocco's adoption of IMF and World Bank economic policies has had devastating repercussions on the nation's low income populations due to the downsizing of the state's expenditures on vital sectors such as education, health and transportation. Lalami creates a fictional space through which she comments on the outcomes of market liberalization and privatization in Morocco and illustrates how the country's socioeconomic problems, including religious extremism, are caused by a combination of external and internal forces that intertwine with the nation's march towards modernization and integration into global economy. Through a close reading of Lalami's works, we show how corrupt Moroccan officials and their unscrupulous elite business allies take advantage of the prevalent discourse of 'war on terror' to attain personal gains, justify their flawed economic policies, silence opposing voices, and crush the nation's poor.

Key words: Laila Lalami; Neoliberalism; Contemporary Morocco; Cultural representation; IMF; World bank; Terrorism

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INTRODUCTION

Young people these days seemed to have no idea what country they were from: They talked of Morocco as if its history had begun ten years ago, as if the issues they were facing had just appeared on the scene, lacking any provenance, devoid of any context (*Secret Son*, pp.273-274).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate Moroccan novelist Laila Lalami's representation of the consequences of economic policies adopted by successive Moroccan governments since independence on a number of characters with divergent socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, the paper examines how Lalami's collection of short stories, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), and novel, *Secret Son* (2009), demonstrate that Morocco's implementation of IMF stabilization program and World Bank-backed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) has resulted in the spread of shanty towns and an increase in unemployment rates as successive Moroccan governments have cut their direct financial expenditures on vital sectors such as education, health and transportation. Moreover, we argue that Lalami's two books depict how Morocco's adoption of policies of market liberalization and privatization and the signing of free trade agreements (FTAs) with economic heavyweights, such as the EU and the US, have simultaneously increased the socioeconomic fragility of low income people and served the interests of the country's elites. As the narratives of the characters are related during the course of the two works, the challenging socioeconomic conditions these characters experience become more and more apparent, highlighting their vulnerability due to the state's failure to provide the basic welfare needs.

As the above quotation from Lalami's *Secret Son* shows, the country's socioeconomic problems are the product of a combination of external and internal forces that intertwine with the nation's march towards

modernization and integration into global economy. In this sense, Lalami's works portray how contemporary Moroccan society's socioeconomic problems are inextricable from strategies and policies adopted by successive Moroccan governments in response to global political, cultural, socioeconomic and ideological transformations, including religious extremism. In this context, we draw on recent studies that stipulate that free trade agreements have been used by US as incentives to encourage certain countries, including Morocco, to curb terrorism. Moreover, through a close reading of Lalami's works, we show how the Moroccan government exploits this discourse to silence the opposition and crush the nation's poor. Our analysis of Lalami's texts attempt to illustrate how the novelist creates a fictional space through which she comments on the outcomes of market liberalization and privatization in Morocco. This paper does not, however, attempt to evaluate the alternative outcomes had not market liberalization occurred, nor does it suggest that Morocco would have been better off had it not engaged in market liberalization and privatization. In other words, in this paper we, as the quotation from Lalami's *Secret Son* shows, contextualize the problems that Lalami's characters encounter within the fictional space she creates in her two books.

Laila Lalami was born and raised in Morocco. She pursued her postgraduate studies in Britain and the US. Currently, she lives in Los Angeles and teaches at the University of California Riverside. Her fiction highlights the socioeconomic circumstances and conditions under which Moroccan characters live in contemporary Morocco. In this sense, like some other Arab American writers, Lalami's works highlight "a transnational consciousness ... formed through imaginative connections to both the US and the Arab homeland as well as to the spaces of physical travel and mobility between them." (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p.9) *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and *Secret Son*, written in English, depict characters that are socioeconomically varied.¹ *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* narrate the stories of four characters who attempt to illegally immigrate to Spain. We meet Murad, Halima, Aziz and Faten, who have come from different Moroccan cities, as they try to cross the Strait of Gibraltar on a depleted Zodiac. Unable to find decent jobs in Morocco, they hope to find a better future in Spain. As the captain drops them off the Spanish shore, the four characters are arrested by the Spanish coast

guards. Faten manages to enter the Spanish territories, albeit at a costly price, where she eventually works as a prostitute, while Aziz, Murad and Halima are deported. On a second attempt after two months, Aziz succeeds in crossing the Strait and finds a farming job in Catalonia before finding a job in a restaurant in Madrid. Murad and Halima have to find their feet again in Morocco. After a lengthy spell of unemployment, Murad finds a job as a shopkeeper in a tourist bazaar, while Halima gets a divorce from her drunkard husband and lives with her children in a slum in Casablanca.

Lalami's other work, *Secret Son*, depicts the life of Youssef El-Mekki who lives with his mother, Rachida, in Hay A Najat slum in Casablanca. At the age of twenty, Youssef discovers that he is not the son of a schoolteacher who passed away years ago in a tragic accident, but rather he is the illegitimate son of Nabil Amrani, a thriving businessman. Youssef moves out of Hay An Najat and lives in an apartment owned by his father in one of Casablanca's stylish neighborhoods. Youssef drops out of university to work as an apprentice at a hotel of which his father owns a large share. In the meanwhile, Youssef's half-sister, Amal, finishes her education from the prestigious UCLA and her parents travel to the US to attend her commencement. At the same time, Nabil's wife, Malika, orchestrates a plan along with Nabil's brothers to dispossess Youssef. Heartbroken and distraught, Youssef returns to Hay An Najat where he is recruited by a radical Islamist party to assassinate Farid Benaboud, a journalist whom the party accuses of smearing its reputation. Attempting to thwart the murder he was recruited for, ironically Youssef is arrested by the police as an accomplice in the crime.

As the above two plotlines show, Lalami's two books valorize the socioeconomic problems of contemporary Morocco. While the two books depict some of the chronic problems that Morocco faces such as unemployment, poverty and corruption, Lalami also shows how economic structural transformation plans adopted by the state to curb these problems have in fact entrenched the interests of the nation's elites, and simultaneously, disfranchised low income populations. In addition, Lalami depicts some of the recent challenges facing Moroccan governments such as religious extremism and highlights how the state manipulates this issue to hide its failure to deliver better living conditions. In this context, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* three of the four characters are attempting to illegally immigrate to Spain because they are looking for better living conditions. Aziz, Murad and Halima are crushed by a socioeconomic situation that gives them little hope for progress and change. And although Faten flees Morocco on the heels of an anti-monarchy comment she makes, she knows that as a slum dweller, she does not stand a chance against the political forces that control her life. In any event, the four characters' prospects in Morocco are quite bleak and

¹ For a discussion of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, see Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman. (2008). Literary Weaving of Maghribiyya Consciousness: Lalami's Retelling of Jenara's Moroccan Tale in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. *JALA*, 2. See also Alami, A. I. (2012). "Illegal" crossing, historical memory and postcolonial agency in Laila Lalami's *hope and other dangerous pursuits*. *The Journal of African Studies*, 17. For a discussion of *Secret Son*, see Salaita, S. (2011). *Modern Arab American fiction: A reader's guide* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP).

uncertain. Whether a university degree holder, a partisan, a housewife or a skilled worker, these characters, Lalami's two books suggest, are stuck in a stagnant economic situation that renders them helpless and powerless.

Similarly, the Casablanca that *Secret Son* portrays is a city of two worlds: a world of Nabil Amrani and that of Youssef El-Mekki. While the two characters live in the same city, they never cross the same pathways since the former belongs to the city's elites, while the latter is part of the city's large less-privileged populations. Youssef's fate, as he mulls towards the end of the novel, is to live and die in a shanty town, while his half-sister, Amal, and her ilk lead the country by virtue of their socioeconomic class and their Western-based education. In both works, the state is an active agent in creating and maintaining socioeconomic exclusion through its failure to provide sufficient public services to the inhabitants of the shanty towns and its manipulation of terrorism and religious extremism. In other words, in both works Lalami highlights the vulnerability of a wide spectrum of Moroccan people due to the country's deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances.²

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND POSTCOLONIAL PROBLEMS

Practically, since its independence in 1956, Morocco's economic plans including those of agriculture, the nation's largest economic sector, have favored, according to James N. Sater, "rural notables due to their intermediate role between the state and the peasantry." (James, 2010, p.93) Moreover, the country's "ostensibly liberal approach to economic development was meant to serve the interests of Morocco's rising, urban, commercial bourgeoisie." (Ibid.) Agriculture regulatory reforms (in particular modification of the Agricultural Investment Code) "have consolidated and expanded certain aspects of state powers" since the agricultural code allows the Moroccan government to remove collective ownership and place it under the power of the state for future privatization and even perhaps "appropriation" of land (Davis, 2006). Apparently, since independence the state has preserved a socioeconomic hierarchy in which the elites rule the country while the poor remain excluded from the country's developing plans. Lalami's texts highlight this issue in several episodes. For instance, in *Secret Son*, the elites, identified

² For a recent study of the socioeconomic and political consequences of neoliberalism in the Middle East, see Bogaerta, K. (2013). Contextualizing the Arab revolts: The politics behind three decades of neoliberalism in the Arab world. *Middle East Critique*, 22. Bogaerta concludes that the outbreak of the Arab uprisings (Arab Spring) makes Middle East observers and area scholars "pay closer attention to the impact of 30 years of neoliberalism reform, the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of the majority of the Arab populations and the increased class divisions in Arab societies" (p.231).

by their surnames for generations, are the ones running the state and business. Early in the novel, As Youssef returns from a visit to the house of a classmate who belongs to one of the nation's elites, he "wonder[s] what it would be like to live ... with people like the Alaouis, the Filalis, the El Fassis – and the Amranis." (Lalami, 2009, p.70) These people's surnames, Youssef muses, "have a pedigree" (p.67) that entitles them to "run the country" (p.117) since, and even before, independence.

Morocco's independence brought about a period of optimism that lasted for around twenty years and saw Moroccan economy witness a boom in the late 1960s and 1970s primarily due to an international rise in the price of the country's main export, phosphate, and a similar rise in remittances. However, from the 1980s onwards, the country has encountered a series of socioeconomic challenges that have eventually resulted in the increase of the gap between the poor and the rich. Capitalizing on the economic boom in the seventies, the state used 'rentier income ... to pacify the population and buy support for incumbent regimes' by guarantying jobs in the public sector, increasing salaries of public sector employees, and subsidizing essential food items (Harrigan & El-Said, 2010). According to World Bank figures, the ratio of public expenditure to GDP in Morocco increased from only 12 percent in 1967 to 22 percent in 1976 (World Bank, 2014); The number of employees in the public sector increased from 50,000 employees to 500,000 between the years 1960 to 1980.³ However, when the international prices of phosphate towards the end of the seventies fell, Morocco turned into borrowing from abroad to finance the increasing gap between revenues and expenditures, with foreign debt rising from US\$2.9 billion in 1976 to US\$11.7 billion in 1984, and subsequently, the country joined the list of the 15 most indebted countries worldwide (World Bank, 2014).

In a bid to curb debts and to revitalize its economy, Morocco entered into agreements with the IMF and World Bank. The IMF placed austerity measures to stabilize the economy through contractionary fiscal and monetary policies and currency devaluation in exchange of "seven Standby Loans between 1983 and 1992." (Harrigan & El-Said, 2010) Concomitantly, the World Bank initiated Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) under which the Moroccan government abandoned its state-led role in favor of a private-led economy through liberalizing the financial sector, privatizing state companies, and opening trade through tariff reductions. These measures had led to reducing the number of new recruitment in the public sector with public jobs limited to only 10,000 jobs per year (Bouharbat, 2006, p.166); a fall in public investment from 13 percent in 1982 to only 4 percent in 1986 (World

³ Sater, p.96. See also Bouharbat, B. (2006). Unemployment, status in employment and wages in Morocco. *Applied Econometrics and International Development*, 6.

Bank, 2014); and eliminating the state's involvement in vital sectors such as education, health and transportation. While these measures may have resulted in reducing the state's public expenditures, they have negatively influenced the lives of millions of Moroccan people, especially the country's poor. Shanty towns swelled, unemployment increased, and public services in the educational, health and transportation sectors deteriorated and diminished. The state's gradual retreat from the economic scene and the continual uncontrollable increase of prices resulted in protests and riots during the 1980s with workers continually demanding higher wages.

Unemployment became more and more urban, with unemployment rate in urban areas rising from 12.3 percent in 1982 to 20.3 percent in 1994 compared to unemployment rate in rural areas in the same period of 9.5 percent and 10.8 percent (Ibid., p.165). Unemployment in urban areas went up among educated workers in particular. For example, urban unemployment rate in 2002 reached to 18.3 percent compared to 3.9 percent in rural areas, with 32.2 percent unemployment among university graduates as opposed to 5.6 percent among uneducated workers (Ibid., p.166). The substantial unemployment rate among educated workers is attributed in part to the shrinking of job opportunities in the public sector since "educated workers typically work in the public sector." (Ibid.) The pattern of unemployment is also worrying because it reflects "the lack of sophistication of the economy" since the jobs created do not need an educated labor force, at least on the scale that was coming onto the labor market (Rivlin, 2012, p.87). In addition to a more than one million unemployed, Morocco had, as of 2009, an underemployed population of nearly one million people who in rural areas represent seasonal workers on the harvest and in urban areas are represented by "petty traders and part-time work[ers] in very small businesses." (Ibid.) Both unemployment and underemployment result in low earnings and contribute to a high rate of poverty which unofficial estimates put at "14 percent of the whole population, with another 25 percent vulnerable to poverty." (Ibid.)

2. FICTION AND SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

In a way, Lalami's books attempt to investigate the repercussions of the country's implementation of IMF and World Bank plans and the concomitant open market policies. For instance, in *Secret Son*, Nabil Amrani, a businessman with noble family roots reminisces towards the end of the novel on the early stages of his life when he 'denounced the imposition by the World Bank and IMF of a structural adjustment plan, called these institutions "tools of neocolonialism *par excellence*" (p.273). Nabil's meditations on the past is

inseparable from his generation's disappointment with the transformations that the nation has witnessed since independence as a result of adopting IMF and World Bank policies, which in hindsight, led to the deterioration of the living standards for the overwhelming majority of the population. As a young man, Nabil was optimistic about the future and his generation's ability to uplift his country's economy which "was being shaped by the children of independence, people like Nabil" (p.85). Nabil's position has in fact dramatically changed after he entered the world of trade and commerce. As a businessman, he has become more self-centered. At one point, Nabil expresses his anger when he sees queues of unemployed youths who are "pestering MPs" for a job and muses "[h]ow different this generation was from his" (p.81). Nabil insists that "thirty years ago, opportunity was to be taken, not asked for like a favor or demanded like a right" (p.81, emphasis added). Apparently, Nabil constructs the past as idyllic and rosy while the present is gloomy and bleak. Nabil's comparison between the past and the present invites the reader to think about the causes and consequences of the socioeconomic transformations that the nation has experienced over the past thirty years.

In this context, one should consider how the stabilization program set by the IMF and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank has had devastating consequences on Moroccan populations since they were first implemented in the early 1980s. With substantial cuts in public expenditures on education, health and transportation sectors, Morocco's elites thrived while the country's poor in urban and rural areas were hardly hit. In fact, these policies have resulted in the impoverishment of peasants and rural exodus from the more unruly north of Morocco, and hence, contributed to the spread of shanty towns. The Moroccan state policies over the past three decades concentrated on agricultural intensification in the hope of "transform[ing] traditional farmland into modern, surplus-producing export-oriented agrarian capitalism," (Sater, p.91) which has resulted in over-irrigation and in destroying local vegetation by excess ploughing of the soil. (Davis, 2006, p.28) Overall, the country's "modernization and reform in the countryside ... led to economic deprivation and rural exodus." (Sater, p.93) As a result, many Moroccans have legally immigrated to Europe up until mid-1980s, while many others who have not succeeded in crossing the Strait of Gibraltar "started to fill the increasing number of shanty towns in urban centres especially around Casablanca." (Ibid)

In *Secret Son*, we see new immigrants arrive in the shanty town of Hay An Najat, where Youssef and his mother live. As the novel opens and rains heavily fall down, Youssef thinks about farm laborers who have suffered from years of drought and whose "teenage children crowded the markets and drove down wages for every kind of labor" (p.4). Youssef, himself a slum

dweller, is aware of the fact that slums are swelling because peasants are moving to the city in search of jobs and better living conditions. However, Hay An Najat is not better than the impoverished countryside. In fact, the government has done little to help alleviate people's miseries in Hay An Najat. As the novel opens, Hay An Najat is flooded by torrential rains and a government official promises desperate people of help, but he is mocked by the slum dwellers because they know that "[t]his guy doesn't even know where he is!" (p.15).

In Hay An Najat, "houseflies thrived, growing bigger and bolder. They grazed on piles of trash, competing with sheep and cows for tea grounds, vegetable peels, and empty containers of yogurt" (p.209). In short, Hay An Najat is the home of "peddlers and smugglers, hustlers and hawkers, brokers and fixers, vendors and dealers, beggars and drifters—all the people who, in the end, made up the other, the greater half of the country" (p.132). As Youssef succinctly puts it, slum dwellers represent the majority of Moroccan population who simply live in miserable conditions. In fact, many of the characters who feature in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, too, live in slums, such as Faten and Halima. Faten lives with her mother in the Douar Lhajja slum, "the kind of place where couscous pots were used as satellite dishes." (Lalami, 2005, p.135) In addition, when Halima is deported to Morocco following her arrest as she tries to illegally cross the Strait of Gibraltar, she settles in Sidi-Moumen, a slum outside Casablanca (p.119). As she could not find a janitorial job like the one she had before she left, "she joined the hordes of day workers at the market, spent her time squatting on the dirt road, waiting for a nod from someone who needed laundry washed or spring cleaning done" (p.119). In her representation of Halima's life, Lalami highlights in her fiction one of the chronic problems of modern day Morocco, i.e. unemployment.

The state's failure to contain unemployment is brilliantly captured in Lalami's two books. For instance, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Aziz, a skilled worker finds himself planning to illegally immigrate to Spain because he has been unable to find a job for a long period of time during which he has been living off his wife's money. In Spain he works in farming and then in a restaurant. After a spell of five years in Spain, Aziz observes during a short visit to Morocco that unemployment has in fact increased in his homeland. One afternoon, he goes to a café in Casablanca, and notices that all the people there are men and "wonder[s] why the place was so packed in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday, but the serious expression on everyone's face provided an answer to his question. They were unemployed" (p.173). Even in cities known for their popularity among tourists like Tangier, job opportunities are scarce and people, like Murad, depend on informal sector for making a living.

Similarly, in *Secret Son*, frequently the reader meets jobless youths who "stan[d] around the street corners" (p.115). In fact, having received a few rejection letters for positions he applied for, Youssef contemplates on the high rate of unemployment in his country (p.210). Indeed, when he hands in an application for a public sector job, the expression on the face of the man who takes the application from him is familiar to Youssef: "an immediate appraisal, categorizing him [Youssef] as another supplicant" (p.221). Youssef remarks that the man takes the letter from him and add[s] it to a pile on his right-hand side" (p.221). This sense of futility and helplessness is further enhanced when Youssef receives a rejection letter from the Police Academy, to which he has applied upon his mother's proposal that "[a]fter the terrorist attacks of May 16 ..., the government had invested massive amounts of money in security," and hence, many police jobs are opening up that, his mother insists, there is no need for connections to support his application (p.210). Youssef and his fellows, like Amin, know that "their names and addresses having already disqualified their applications" (p.226). Youssef even tries petty jobs like a receptionist at a cybercafé, but the angry owner of the café "bark[s] at him that he regret[s] having placed the ad – he ha[s] received more than one hundred calls and ha[s] spent all day on the phone, turning people down" (p.222).

To a large extent, Morocco's economic situation resembles that of a number of developing countries which have also suffered from economic policies imposed on them by IMF and World Bank. As Neil Lazarus reminds us, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have been imposed on developing economies in the 1980s following world economic downturn of late 1960s and early 1970s "as conditions for the distribution of loans, which the recipient nations are not in any position to refuse." (Lazarus, 2004, p.31) These programs, Lazarus maintains, have damaging effects on the world's poorest nations since they render them 'subservient to the needs of the global market,' and eventually, ensure that developing countries "retain their peripheral status, neither attempting to delink themselves from the world system nor ever imagining themselves capable of participating in it from any position of parity, let alone power." (Ibid., pp.37-38) Specifically, the world's poorest are most strongly hit by these conditions as they increase their vulnerability in an increasingly open market:

They [Structural Adjustment Programs] typically mandate huge cuts in government spending and social provision; the slashing of wages; the opening up of local markets to imported goods and the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment; the privatization of state enterprises and social services; and deregulation in all sectors to ensure that all developments are driven by the logic of the market rather than by social need or government. (Ibid., p.37)

Lalami's two books explore, albeit fictionally, the

consequences of implementing these economic policies on the impoverished masses in contemporary Morocco whereby education, health and transportation sectors are the victims of implementing the Structural Adjustment Programs and the adoption of policies of market liberalization and privatization.

Morocco, under the supervision of the World Bank, initiated a number of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that saw the country embark on a privatization campaign and sign free trade agreements with heavyweight economic blocs like the EU and the US. Since the launch of its privatization campaign in the late 1980s, the Moroccan government began delegating some of its responsibilities in 'the creation of wealth and employment' to the private sector on the basis of encouraging entrepreneurship and generating economic efficiency (Sater, pp.101-103). However, privatization has been marred by corruption and lack of transparency. In Lalami's *Secret Son*, journalist Farid Benaboud was writing an article for the *Casablanca Magazine* on the government's recent campaign to promote Morocco as a tourist destination. Nabil, himself a hotel owner, lauds the government's campaign as viable and insightful, but slyly uses the occasion to advance a personal interest by proposing that the government should reduce taxes on hotels in order for the campaign to succeed. Lalami brilliantly dramatizes how Nabil exploits the government's campaign to maximize his profits. Eventually, Benaboud's article "shift[s] the discussion of the government's latest marketing campaign to a debate over tax breaks and incentives for hotel owners" (p.132). Nabil ensures that his thoughts are endorsed by Benaboud by offering the latter help in securing an admission for his eleven-year-old daughter at a prestigious French school via his connections.

In addition, free trade agreements have had damaging effects on Moroccan industries and the country's overall economic performance. For instance, while Morocco dismantled customs duties and opened its market to EU and US products, both blocs have had their subsidies "remain in place" (White, 2005, p.606). Tariff reductions have resulted in reducing Morocco's state income by an estimate of '€5 billion' between 2002 and 2012 (Ibid., p.111). Moreover, while free trade agreement with EU caused the EU exports to Morocco to nearly double to MAD 133 million, Morocco's exports to EU marginally increased to MAD 86 million between 2001 and 2007. (Ibid.) To finance the budgetary gap that tariff reductions have caused, the Moroccan government has "resorted to a combination of new debts, continuing privatization, release of public-sector workers, and broadening of tax base." (Ibid., p.113) Overall, Morocco's increasing integration in the world economy has resulted in 'increasing economic prosperity among Morocco's elite' while "the country's overall socio-economic record remains utterly poor." (Ibid. p.107)

Through focusing on the narratives of a number of the less-privileged and marginalized characters, Lalami's books depict, albeit fictionally, the consequences of Morocco's adoption of IMF and World Bank policies of market liberalization and privatization. By narrating the stories of Faten, Murad, Aziz and Halima in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, and that of Youssef El Mekki in *Secret Son*, Lalami creates a platform to comment on how these policies have contributed to disfranchising poor people while increasing the wealth of the country's elite. In this way, the two books highlight the negative consequences of Morocco's neoliberal policies over the past thirty years, notably market liberalization and privatization. For instance, Youssef in *Secret Son* finds out that the hotel he works at hosts a nearly uninterrupted series of meetings between investors and government officials. Youssef ponders:

Foreigners were buying up utility companies, sugar plants, textile firms, banks and hotels, telecommunications start-ups, and even fertilizer factories. Local supermarkets were becoming outposts of international chains. Three-hundred-year-old riads in the medina were being converted into bed-and-breakfasts. Gated communities were being built for European retirees. At every turn, Youssef watched his compatriots sing the praises of the most beautiful country in the world and then sell it to the highest bidders. (p.143)

As the above quotation illustrates, the novel highlights how privatization and market liberalization have transformed Morocco's economy and changed its national identity without necessarily creating enough jobs, and hence, improving the nation's standards of living as unemployment and poverty remained uncontrollable. Cuts in the Moroccan consecutive governments' public spending coupled with privatization and market liberalization have rendered state services inferior to the ones provided by the private sector. The co-existence of public and private services in education, health and transportation leads to the creation of "two tier system" in which those with sufficient income enjoy improving services, while the poor have access to only those of low quality." (Kessler, 2003)

Practically, Morocco's publicly-funded education sector is "poorly funded and equipped and state employees have few incentives for improving educational programmes and teaching styles." (Sater, p.116) The result of this educational system is what Moroccans recognize as "a large quantity of semi-skilled, polyglot-illiterate, and semi-educated high school and university graduates." (Ibid.) In addition, the "two tier: Education system draws better-off students away from public schools which transforms education "from being a mechanism for social mobility to become an instrument of status and exclusion." (Kessler, 2003) Moroccan educational condition occupies a central place in Lalami's representation of Moroccan contemporary society. For instance, in *Secret Son*, Nabil Amrani believes that

local universities “chur[n] out graduates who have no marketable skills” (p.122) and that “university degree alone won’t lead anywhere in this country” (p.138). Similarly, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Murad, a bachelor degree holder of English from a local university, laments the fact that he studied English and censures himself for not having “worked with the smugglers, bringing in tax-free goods from Ceuta, instead of wasting his time at the university” (p.107). Education, both at school and university levels, has become a site of corruption. This is best represented in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* by the character of Larbi Amrani, a high ranking official at the ministry of education responsible for deciding where newly graduated teachers would perform their two years of civil service. The reader is made aware that Larbi is “not above taking the occasional bribe” (p.23). He has no qualms moving a friend’s niece up the list though he knows that this “would require creative handling of the paperwork” (p.24). Although he knows that this is unscrupulous, Larbi rationalizes that “[h]e didn’t create the system; he was just getting by, like everyone else” (p.24).

Larbi’s awareness of the breakdown of the national educational system is best reflected by the fact that his children receive private rather than public education. For instance, his daughter, Noura, attended the private French lycee and is set to pursue her education next year at NYU. Disappointed at Noura’s reluctance to study in the US, Larbi insists that “a degree from abroad would be better for her” (p.47). As a matter of fact, Larbi has already sent his son, Nadir, to study electrical engineering in Quebec (p.24). In fact, he feels satisfied “to think of his son’s future and of the position Nadir would be able to get with an engineering degree, especially one from abroad” (p.25). In this sense, Larbi looks down upon local universities although he helps administer the nation’s educational sector. Larbi’s attitude is not far different from that of Nabil Amrani in *Secret Son* who is “unable to suppress a smile” when he tells people that his daughter, Amal, is studying at ULCA (p.116). As Sater puts it, “education certainly is a core problem” in Morocco because it is responsible for producing “a large quantity of semi-educated workers and employees produc[ing] at best mediocre results across all economic sectors.”(Ibid., p.116) Education is severely influenced by the government’s downsizing of its spending. Graduates of local universities do not stand a chance with those studying abroad. For instance, in *Secret Son*, Youssef knows that real jobs in Morocco are available for those who have degrees from abroad, while for people like him there is only the “prospect of a degree and maybe a third-rate job, if he was lucky” (p.138).

Similarly, the health sector in Morocco has been badly influenced by implementing IMF and World Bank policies of public expenditure cuts as “public hospital is decrepit

and lack doctors, equipment and medicine, and fewer than 30 percent of Moroccans have health insurance coverage.” (Alam, 2013) For instance, in *Secret Son* the Islamist party opens a health center in Hay An Najat simply because the government has failed to provide the necessary health care for the dwellers of the slum. In addition, when Youssef is beaten up by the police following his participation in protests against bus fares hikes, he knows that there is “only one place for him to go,” that is the infirmary set up by the Islamist party in Hay An Najat (p.49). As this episode shows, the state, as Hatim, the leader of the Islamist party, succinctly puts it, “has abandoned the people” (p.17), and one would add, inflicted damages on their bodies instead of providing the needed health services to its citizens.

Similarly, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* a number of poor people suffer from the shortage of health services offered by the government. For instance, while on the bus en route to see a judge in the posh neighborhood in Anfa, Halima sees a passenger who boards the bus at a stop near a hospital, and upon lifting his shirt, he “reveal[s] a square pouch taped to his abdomen. The liquid inside looked like urine” (p.69). The man begs people to help him pay his hospital bills (p.70). Halima, herself poor and marginalized, pities the man and offers some help. In fact, Halima’s mother is another victim of the deteriorating health services offered by the government. Having no money to pay to the doctor’s (p.131), Halima’s mother, Fatiha, resorts to alternative medication, travelling to Rabat where a “bleeding” tree is said to offer her a remedy for a chronic pain of arthritis (p.123). As this episode shows the state’s failure to provide health services to its citizens render them prey to all sorts of manipulation and exploitation.

The third sector which suffers from the state’s public expenditure cuts is that of transportation. In *Secret Son*, for instance, when Youssef knows that “bus fares would be raised by forty centimes,” he realizes that “he would not be able to buy the pair of sneakers he wanted” (p.46). Therefore, Youssef participates in protests against hikes and gets beaten by the police. Later on, when Youssef asks his father, who is an owner of a bus company, about reasons behind raising bus fares, his father replies: “The government raised the price of fuel, which decreased our profits. And we wanted to expand our fleet, so we needed higher revenues” (p.123). Similarly, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Lalami depicts the transportation system as depleted. The bus that Halima takes to Anfa is “an old bus, its front bumper hanging loose, roar[ing] up in a billowing cloud of black smoke” (p.69). The only means of transportation that seems to be modern is the Casablanca Airport shuttle train which people nicknames “Aouita, after the Olympic gold medalist, because it was fast and always on time” (p.157).

The fact that the only functioning means of transportation is the airport shuttle train shows that the

state heavily invested in building modern infrastructure to serve tourists rather than locals. In this way, urban developments, including means of transportations, in Morocco privilege the exchange value of the city over its use value, and hence, “are more likely to reproduce social inequality instead of alleviating poverty.” (Zemni & Bogaert, 2011) Nonetheless, Morocco, with the aid of international donor agencies,⁴ has tried to promote itself in European markets as a tourist destination, and hence, has offered incentives to both foreign and national businessmen to invest in this sector as part of the state’s plans to get the private sector involved in creating new openings and modernizing the country. The heavy investment in tourism is rationalized on the basis that a developing country, such as Morocco, would benefit from exporting services, such as tourism, rather than tradable goods due to its weak technological infrastructure, and hence, tourism will “provide jobs and hard currency thus promoting macroeconomic stability.” (Hazbun, 1998, p.4)

In this context, Lalami’s two books offer a stark image of tourism, one of the sectors that the government has encouraged both local and foreign capital to invest in. In *Secret Son*, Nabil Amrani, a major investor in the tourism sector, insists, in an interview with journalist Farid Benaboud, that the sector is “creating jobs; ... offering training; [and] ... providing services.” (p.130). Benaboud, who is preparing a report on a government’s campaign to promote Morocco to European tourists, is not impressed by Nabil’s statements and questions the viability of the jobs created by the private sector: “If you’re creating a hundred jobs at fifteen hundred dirhams a month, how are people supposed to live on that? They’re still going to live below the poverty line” (p.131). Benaboud is skeptical about the role of the private sector is playing in uplifting the national economy. What Benaboud seems to say, albeit indirectly, is that the private sector is exploiting low income people by paying them minimum wages. Confronted with Benaboud’s argument, Nabil demands that the government should outlaw “false guides,” whom he accuses of pestering tourists, and use “a more muscular approach to this problem” (p.131). In his argument, Nabil admits that the tourism industry supports a large informal sector, such as unofficial or false guides, but fails to acknowledge that this informal sector exposes the high unemployment rates in tourist destinations such as Fez and Marrakech (Ibid., p.5). In addition, the *muscular* approach, which Nail proposes to solve the false guides’ problem, indicates the pitfall of public and private

partnership. The private sector will use its power and influence over the government, in the name of partnership and common goals, to maximize its gains.

In fact, Nabil’s viewpoint is countered by that of Murad in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. Murad, whose bachelor in English was insufficient to secure a job for him, is one of “the false guides’ that Nabil wants the government to outmuscle. Murad’s inability to benefit from tourism as “the guides outnumber[r] the tourists’ (p.99) pushes him to illegally immigrate to Spain. Even after he finds a job in a tourist bazaar, the tourist sector does not seem as lively and profit-generating as the government contends. The last story in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* portrays how the tourism sector is stagnant. The omniscient narrator tells us that Murad spends his time reading while his colleague, Anas, spends most of the afternoons “slouched on a chair in the corner, snoring softly” (p.177). Thus, the entry of the customers to the bazaar shop is ‘a welcome distraction’ (p.177). Hence, the existence of an informal sector, represented by what Nabil Amrani calls “false guides,” and the quiet afternoons that the two shopkeepers experience frequently show that tourism has failed in absorbing unemployment even in cities publicized as major tourist destinations.

In addition, in *Secret Son*, Nabil Amrani turns a blind eye to the impact of his business on the surroundings of Casablanca. The price hikes of transportation, the exclusion of local workers from taking corporate positions, and the prostitution services provided to foreign tourists are all justified in the name of modernization and profits. As Nabil implants Youssef in The Grand Hotel of which he owns a major share, Youssef discovers more shocking realities about tourism. In the first place, he realizes that one cannot work in such a place unless they are well-connected (p.142). Secondly, Youssef notices how there is a prejudice against people who show signs of religious inclinations: “Bareheaded women could work anywhere, but those who wore headscarves had to work in the back office” (p.140). In addition, Youssef notices that prostitution is one of the pillars of tourism which is facilitated by hotels. One day, Youssef notices that Loubna, a former classmate at university, is in the company of an old man from the Arab Gulf region. At first, Youssef is furious, but gradually “[h]is disapproval did not last, though, because there were too many women like Loubna orbiting around the hotel” (p.144). As the above episodes show, Lalami questions the viability of tourism as a reliable and sustainable source of revenue for the nation. In fact, Lalami seems to highlight the fact that neoliberal economic policies, to quote Neil Lazarus, lead to an “obscenely burgeoning prosperity” of a minority of people “and the steady immiseration of the large majority of the world’s population.” (Lazarus, 2004, p.27)

Not only are the socioeconomic consequences of neoliberal policies gloomy, the economic results have

⁴ Such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and US Aid and International Development (USAID). For detailed discussion, see Daher, R. F. (2007). Tourism, heritage, and urban transformations in Jordan and Lebanon: Emerging actors and global-local juxtaposition. In R. F. Daher (Ed.), *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, change and transformation*. Cleveland, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View Publications.

not been satisfactory either. Recent studies on the impact of foreign direct investments (FDIs) on Moroccan economy show that the output and productivity of industrial Moroccan firms have not increased due to the liberalization of capital account, but possibly it has decreased over the years (Haddad & Harrison, 1993; (Sadik & Bolbol, 2001). This evidence strongly reverberates in *Secret Son*. In the shanty town of Hay Al-Najat, we see individuals using affordable foreign TVs, satellites and mobiles; however, we rarely observe Moroccan-made products. At the other part of Casablanca, the nickname "Marlboro and Mercedes" of rich students is quite telling. Moroccan products lack the prestige, and perhaps quality, of "foreign" ones. At the same time, Moroccan businessmen, like Nabil Amrani, regurgitate the government's discourse that blames Islamists for the failure of market liberalization through their "radicalism." In an interview with journalist Farid Benaboud, Nabil Amrani insists that Islamists represent a threat to disrupt government's plans to uplift tourism in the country because they give "an image problem" which forces European tourists to "go to Marabella instead of Marrakech for their Christmas holiday." (p.130)

In fact, Nabil's words explain how successive Moroccan governments have employed this discourse to cover up the malfunctioning of their strategies to deliver better living standards and conditions. Moreover, what is embedded in Nabil's words is the fact that market liberalization and the "war on terror" are intricately interrelated, which is best understood when neoliberalism is viewed as "a political project as it is an economic and development project." (Davis, 2006, p.89) Tools of market liberalization, most notably free trade agreements, have been used in the "war on terror" by, to quote the words of US trade representative at the signing of FTA with Morocco in 2004 Roboert Zoellick "offer[ing] trade and openness as vital tools for leaders striving to build more open, optimistic, and tolerant Islamic societies." (White, 2005, p.597 [italics in original]) This resonates with the Moroccan experience as White argues that "*FTAs are typically thought of as economic agreements, but the [US] agreement with Morocco has an explicit security component. Indeed, US officials have cast the agreement as an opportunity to support a close ally in the region.*" (White, 2005, p. 597) In other words, the local government is reduced into an agent engaged in anti-terrorism activity on behalf of the foreign country in exchange for a package of incentives. From this perspective the local government is identified "as the crucial actor whose behavior creates the link between economic conditions and terrorism." (Ibid., p.377)

Engaging local governments in the fight against terror increases the risk of expanding the power of the state. As White argues, "[t]he FTA complies with the interest of the Moroccan government' at the expense of 'society-society cooperation.'" (White, 2005, p.614) The impact of this as

Davis notes is that "many neoliberal reforms have acted to depoliticize the public sphere in Morocco and thereby delayed the democratic reform of an authoritarian regime ... through discursively repackaging the most urgent problems of reform in terms of economic crisis." (Davis, 2006, p.99) In addition to the value of FTA agreements in "solidifying the Moroccan government's position within the anti-terror camp in the region," one must analyze the role of foreign aid which usually associates free trade agreements and reform structures with improving/deteriorating a country's economic conditions. In the context of the war on terror, foreign aid can be channeled to improve the economic conditions of a country in order to "reduce the supply of terrorists" (Azam & Thelen, 2006, p.378) and to strengthen weak local governments that are "unable to enforce order or patrol their borders and are vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels." (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003). The international evidence suggests that foreign aid is negatively related to economic growth because local governments can divert foreign aid (Burnside & Dollar, 2000); or become complacent in carrying out their responsibilities (Azam, Devararjan, & O'Connell, 1999); or become more authoritative because "aid relaxes [their] need to explain [their] actions to citizens." (Rajan & Subramanian, 2011).

Lalami's representation of the Moroccan government's involvement in the war on terror highlights the intricacy of the relationship between market liberalization, foreign aid and global politics. In *Secret Son*, for instance, the police force is expanding (expectedly by the US money) and the state is not reluctant to repress its people while the international community is silent. When the students at universities in protest against bus fares hikes, the police violently disperse them and arrest a few. Moreover, although the police know about the Islamist party's attempt to assassinate journalist Farid Benaboud, they turn a blind eye because Benaboud's reports have exposed the government's corruption and the state is shrewdly using the discourse of the "war on terror" to achieve its own goals through silencing honest and righteous voices like that of Benaboud at the hands of angry youths like Amin and Youssef who are recruited by the Islamist party to execute the murder.

In fact, the final scene in the novel in which journalist Farid Benaboud is assassinated before the police's eyes is quite telling and reflects how the police victimize poor people, like Youssef, to look good in front of the international society in its alleged "war on terror":

But now he [Youssef] had discovered that the part that had been reserved for him by the state was that of the failed terrorist, the one who gets caught, the one who makes the police look good because his arrest proves that the state tried to protect the inconvenient journalist. (p.290)

At one point, Youssef realizes that poor people are exploited by the government/police because they are weak

and can be presented to the world as terrorists whom the police try to eradicate. For instance, Youssef remembers how the police heavy-handedly beat up Amin's father "[e]ven though he had his papers on him and had committed no crime – except, of course, for the crime of being poor" (p.48). This unhappy recollection makes Youssef realize his position within Moroccan society:

He belonged here with all the other young men no one talked about, except every few years when there was a natural catastrophe, a terrorist attack, or a legislative election. He had grown up in Hay a Najat, away from the eyes of the world, and now he became convinced that it would be his grave, too. (p.199)

Youssef's words are revealing and testify to the falsity of the government's rhetoric about the viability of market liberalization policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank since Youssef, and naturally people of his socioeconomic class, will be almost always identified as terrorists who are ostensibly intent on disrupting the nation's modernization plans.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Lalami's two books show that the expected economic gains of market liberalization to Morocco are almost non-existent, and hence, it is critical to examine some of the economic costs associated with market liberalization. Perhaps the most damaging impact of market liberalization is the increased inequality gap between the poor and the rich. This is a common feature in any economy because market liberalization "tend[s] to enforce a reduction in government involvement at many levels and a reliance on "free market" mechanisms for the functioning of the economy and society, [and hence,] poor populations are usually hard hit." (Davis, 2006, p.89) Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and *Secret Son* demonstrate that Morocco's adoption of IMF and World Bank economic policies have exasperated the problems of characters who belong to the country's poor while they increased the rich's powers. By accepting significant amounts of foreign aid which are officially announced to help Morocco in its market liberalization process but are actually used as a package of incentives to support the US in its alleged "war on terror," the Moroccan government sacrifices innocent and clean-handed people like Youssef and Farid Benaboud to fill the coffers of a small ring of corrupt statesmen and their unscrupulous elite business allies. In this sense, through foregrounding the narratives of a group of low income, marginalized and poor characters, Lalami's two books strongly condemn market liberalization policies and highlight the complicity of the international community in the creation of a political, socioeconomic and ideological environment that fosters radicalism and terrorism.

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