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De-Imperializing Gender: Religious Revivals, Shifting Beliefs, and the Unexpected Trajectory of Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*

In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Laila Lalami's main characters attempt to cross from Morocco to Spain, on a boat designed for eight, but filled with thirty people. Some characters make it, others are turned back. Analyzing this clandestine crossing, literary critics have considered the ways in which these immigrants have found a sense of "feminist consciousness" (De La Cruz-Guzman 2008) or a "deterritorialized self" (Abunaseer 2016) through their journeys. But what is missing within critical inquiry is an emphasis on the religious identifications of the female protagonists. Considering her reasons for writing, Lalami suggests that while Islam is "omnipresent" in the media with stereotypes of "violence, poverty, and gender discrimination," the complexity of Muslims is paradoxically absent—a relegated state of "invisibility," leaving the "Muslim writer" at "war with cliché" (Lalami 2011, 145). While literary interpretation suggests the agency of immigrants, a critical re-reading is needed to lift the cloak of "invisibility" often strewn over complex religious affinities. This new reading lens considers a young college student Faten, invested in the Islamist Party, fleeing the secret police and heading to Spain. This alternative paradigm also analyzes a mother of three young children Halima and her religious convictions after being forced by the Spanish guards to return to Morocco. What deserves greater attention is the manner that religious faith is characterized by the women themselves, by their actions, and by those they encounter, and how it evolves as a result of each woman's attempt to emigrate clandestinely to Spain.

Given contemporary misunderstandings about revivals of piety and political Islam as well as reasons women participate in activism and faith, this re-reading is both timely and imperative. Therefore, my interpretation of these immigration and return stories in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* attempts to show the importance of these conversions as part of layers of contestation within societies. Inflected by an influx of traumatic events, these personal revivals often envisioning political change. Indeed, these religious revivals integrate political rationales and personal identities, while rekindling agency. Even as these religious revivals can lead to unexpected agency or impediments for these characters, their religious views interrupt secular dismissals and gendered objectifications. In this manner, these contested conversions and reconceived religiosities not only interrupt stereotypes of Muslim women from colonial to contemporary times, but these revivals provide a liberating self-awareness. Within Lalami's model, this alternative paradigm of revival protests stereotypes and provokes altered ideas of female kinship, a path for both the reader and protagonist towards de-imperializing gender.

These renewals of faith serve as important counterpoints not only to facile media representations and colonial stereotypes of Muslim women, but also these faith representations contrast other conceptions of Muslim women and religious power. In a critical study of *Gender on the Market*, Deborah Kapchan suggests that Moroccan women often conceive of alternative Islamic practices, a form of women's magic, including substances from the kitchen or the hair of a husband, to try to invoke change in their lives (1996). Indeed, in colonial times alternate practices of Islam were used to resist the racism of colonizers, as Ellen Amster claims, in her work on *Medicine and the Saints* (2013). Using popular practices, Moroccan women, like local herbalists, rejected

the racist epistemology of the French even as they selected parts of western medicine.¹ These practices surface in Lalami's text and include women's magic that are outside of the mosque and textual reading of the *Qu'ran*. Spiritual associations with food, such as preparations for religious holidays, work as a form of empowerment. However, the unexpected trajectory of Lalami's novella empowers female protagonists through conversions and not magical practices. Thus, the trajectory of the novella departs from ways that Moroccan women's power has often been defined through popular practices of healing and magical charms. To be clear, these religious conversions in the novella are not only pathways of secular to Islamist, or from public religiosity to private faith, nor a change from one religion to a different religion. But rather, it is an unexpected pathway where these female characters have transformed ideas of identity, survival, rebellion, and sense of agency, associated with altered religious conceptions. These powerful conversions can be seen in Faten's life, a young woman, growing up in abject poverty, finding safety and political voice through wearing the hijab and joining the moderate party of Islamists. And Halima, a mother, who locates her sense of purpose and power through her community's notions of the miraculous. Not defining women's religious power through unorthodox magic, Lalami's unique reading practice conceives of women's agency within female conceptions of Islam.

Thus, this reading model of renewals conceives of piety as female power, similar, at first glance, to Saba Mahmood's important study, *Politics of Piety* (2005). These practices of devotion as forms of female authority and self-worth resound within the study and the literary model. Observing female participants acceptance of patriarchal norms within the piety movement, Mahmood shows how women participate in this

practice, navigating and negotiating the terms within traditions of Islam. Indeed, religion refers to the practices, beliefs, and ideologies of orthodox Islam. Challenging scholars to pay attention to internal negotiations, Mahmood focuses on women's claims and self-identifications as forms of agency (2005 153). Extending these terms of piety informs my definition of the religious revival as a space of negotiation—a powerful performance site of subjectivity—pervading *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, as the female characters participate, navigate, redefine, and struggle with religious identifications and their personal definitions of what objects and practices are sacred for them. But unlike Mahmood's study of devotion, focused on women's affirmation within orthodox forms, these portraits by Lalami focus on revivals and conversions, which are sudden shifts in beliefs and identification. Furthermore, in Mahmood's study, she suggests that women can find agency within traditional frameworks, without any need for resistance. But within this reading model, Faten discusses how the western world steals their brightest students, suggesting orthodox revivals engage in resistance to other ideologies. Resistance also feeds the conviction of Halima. While pondering divine intervention, since her young son saves her from drowning while crossing the treacherous waters towards Spain, she also resists her neighbor's definition of the miraculous. Both women embody faith as a form of authority, but they also resist gender norms, often sanctioned within religious frames. These unique portraits by Lalami suggest ways that women have adopted and adapted their beliefs, negotiated and carved their own identities. By resisting both secular and orientalist typologies, fledgling identifications of agency and altered kinship bonds in this reading soar in a flight within and beyond orthodox frames.

Religious Revivals: important concepts and contexts

To analyze this novella, it is critical to define some key concepts and the context of revivals, especially given the contemporary relevance of political movements, and the importance of political Islam for two female characters. Religious revivals call for moral, social, and political change, and are not new to Middle Eastern and North African regions; in fact, these reforms often link to economic factors. Political Islam, with its origins in reform, began as an anti-imperial stance. In *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, Tariq Ramadan suggests that political Islam developed as a form of resistance against European colonialism in the early 1900's, wherein the "critical outlook" of Islamic identity would liberate the masses from the "alienation produced by colonialism" (70). For instance, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, believing in the "re-Islamization of his country," Egypt in 1919, joined an anti-British occupation protest at age thirteen. While originally a non-violent movement to change the laws, political Islam has many branches, and the majority remain non-violent. While most Moroccans claim affinity as Muslim, only some would identify as Islamist, which is a reformed political stance. Prescient in the 2005 novella of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, the growing influence of political Islam becomes fully established in Morocco by the Islamist Justice and Development Party, after the protest of February 20, 2011, during Arab Spring, and again in 2016, when they won almost a third of the 395-member Parliament, leading two consecutive governments: a feat no other Islamist party in the Middle East has accomplished.

When considering revivals of political Islam perhaps the greatest misunderstanding regards the differences between extremists and more centrist Islamists. In a study published by Yale University press, Haroon Ullah views both groups as vying for support of conservative donors (2017). But when Islamists use social media, their self-presentation may be deceiving, argues Ullah in his work *Digital World War*, since their media attempts to sway the conservative crowd, not highlighting their many democratic actions (xxiv). In the novella, Faten and her wealthy friend Noura decide to join the Islamic Party, and Islamists are moderates, not extremists. Faten is very active in promoting Islamism—a political role that furthers the party. Among different groups, Islamists hold varying ideas about the relationship to the West and the role of women, but generally most encourage women to participate in women’s groups, political proselytizing, and service works to the poor (Ramadan 73). Often antagonistic towards western power, Faten traces her own family’s poverty and misfortune, tracing the history of her grandfather, who was blinded by chemical weapons used by western colonizers from Spain. Rooted in historical memory, her conversion to Islamism remains both practical and idealistic.

Faten’s revival also reacts against orientalist stereotypes, and these typologies emerge from imperialism, as Mohja Kahf argues in *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999). Negative images of women trapped in an oppressive religion trace back to the era of colonization in Morocco, when French colonizers attacked women’s faith and healing practices, calling them barbaric and backwards. In terms of gender, battles for power and authority were fought between Muslim midwives and European doctors, argues Ellen Amster, in her illuminating work on *Medicine and the*

Saints (2013). Not only did European colonizers dominate resources, they also demanded that Moroccan scholars, saints, and healers be deemed as unpatriotic charlatans.² French colonizers tried to further divide groups, claiming that Arabs practiced true Islam, while the indigenous, Amazigh peoples, also referred to by the French as "Berbers" or "Barbarians" in Northern Africa, practiced witchcraft and magic. This colonial legacy of conquest and division condemned women who practiced non-western healing and alternative rituals, such as attending to female saints, shrines, or local pilgrimages. In Lalami's portrait, after the conversion of Halima, she recalls a pilgrimage to a sacred tree in a shrine.

Within this novella, these personal revivals are unexpected because they show various notions of a religious self, a sacred practice, and a non-western feminist identification—often in response to state, patriarchal, or international pressures. Indeed, religious shifts respond not only to the dangerous crossing from Morocco to Spain, but also their return experiences, after being forcibly sent home. Crossing the Straits of Gibraltar reveals a larger global politics of expulsion and social control, and this short novel demonstrates why these women leave, the xenophobic conditions abroad, and their shifting attitudes, when some are forcibly sent back. In historical terms, restrictions increased for those crossing from Morocco to Spain after 1991, even as borders became more open to Europeans through legislation of the Single European Act of 1986. Even as Lalami's work never pretends to be historical fiction, her female characters, with their religious revivals, respond to the imperializing dynamics of governments and their borders, a contemporary resistance to domination with its privileged crossings of class and continents.

Not only forced from external pressures, these female revivals are part of a personal journey in this novella. At times, there is a gap between how the female protagonists view themselves and the assumptions of other characters. This illuminates problematic assumptions about women and their religious beliefs. When the characters finally narrate their own chapters, Lalami shows the initial beliefs of her characters. Later, she establishes how their convictions about identity, class, and gender shift, demonstrating how characters navigate, negotiate, and change in their religious affiliations. With her unique approach, Lalami's refuses one single or singular box of religious subjectivity—a reading practice to de-fuse western readers' misconceptions of Islam. Inherent in these journeys, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* presents contested conversions and women's agency as forms that inevitably reject orientalist assumptions about Islamic revivals, de-imperializing not only the characters, but the readers who follow their pathways.

Contested Conversions: Political Islam and Revivalism

After narrating how immigrants attempt to cross the Straits of Gibraltar to enter Spain, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* returns to an earlier time period. Specifically, the novella describes the life of Faten and her revival through political Islam, before her journey to Spain. Since Faten grows up in a low-income neighborhood, she first decided to join the Islamic party and wear a headscarf, or *hijab*, not only for reasons of faith and politics, but also to avoid the unwanted attention of older men. While attempting to understand her revival, the reader must step warily, because Lalami gives Faten only a few direct quotes in this chapter, labelled, "The Fanatic." The narrator, an upper-class,

Moroccan father Larbi Amrani, refers to Faten with concern that this veiled fanatic has been influencing his daughter. Indeed, Lalami forces us to exhume reasons that Faten and her friend Noura have joined the Islamist revival movement. In this excavation, we must sort out contested theologies, class differences, and politicized histories—all signs of cultural complexities associated with contemporary Islam. From snippets of dialogue, for instance, we learn of Faten's economic views. She complains of the “injustice we see every day” (26), because the poverty in Morocco signals that Muslims are not sharing the wealth and caring for the poor, an important pillar of Islam. Her religious revival is a form of economic protest.

From the start, forms of piety that Faten practices, such as religious devotion and purification, symbolize a larger ideology and protest of political malaise. Poverty and graft are “proof enough of the corruption of King Hassan, the government and the political parties” argues Faten (26). If Muslims remembered their beliefs, Faten argues, specifically an ethics of integrity with concern for the poor, then the country would not have become corrupt. “If we had been better Muslims, perhaps these problems wouldn’t have been visited on our nation,” she says, while Larbi listens outside the hall door. Why does Faten, coming from a lower-class background, join this Islamist revival movement? Islamists have often fought against the wealth and corruption of governments; they have often proven their activism and have often been arrested. These religious groups have spoken out against injustice and have economic relevance, suggests Mark Tessler and Marilyn Grobschmidt, providing food and security, whereas the state has not.³ Regarded as stalwart fighters against oppressive government, the importance of the Islamists in democratic protest surfaces in Susan Slyomovics' investigation of the Casablanca Bread

Riots of 1981 with protests against the high cost of living. For Faten, the inner spirit and practice of Islam conducts a pathway towards economic and political change. So even as the overall voice in this chapter is Larbi's dismissal of Faten's "fanaticism," critical gaps rupture the perspective of the upper-class father from the economic revivalism of a spirited activist.

Given the way that the author moves between characters, especially Faten and Larbi, it is helpful to clarify how Islamism overlaps, meshes, or clashes with this father's secularity. Secularity is not necessarily a lack of belief in God. Indeed, Larbi participates in religious holidays, even though he has long since given up prayer. But while positioning himself as a Muslim, Larbi also clings to a larger idea of secular politics. In fact, Larbi views the Islamist party as the backward, irrational option, in contrast to his own modernity and secular politics. This severe dichotomy between secular and Islamist as rational versus irrational or modern versus religious is erroneous, argues Talal Asad in his foundational book *Formations of the Secular* (2003). Indeed, these misconceptions flourished during colonial times, argues Asad, alongside presumptions that Muslims rejected modernity. This false dichotomy continues to cause a failure of imagination, suggests Sherine Hafez in her important study, published in 2011, *An Islam of Her Own*, since secular assumptions limit the types of agency and religious identities imagined of the Muslim woman.

Since the religious zeal of Faten interrupts the secular perspective of Larbi, it is important to further clarify this labyrinth of ideologies. Secularism is not just a separation of religious institutions from government, because the medieval world, including Islamic empires, recognized these divisions. But what is interesting about secularism, according

to Asad, is that it “presupposes new concepts of religion, ethics, and politics and new imperatives associated” with these conceptions (2). Secularism has its own sets of “doctrine and practice,” and Asad wonders what “attitudes and behaviors” hide behind secularism’s assumptions of modernity (17). In the social contract of secularism, citizenship “subsumes” religious identities while the government provides stability and prosperity, especially benefiting certain economic classes (13). Since secularity is part of a network of projects, economic and political, which “certain people in power seek to achieve” (13), then secularity also suggests a continuing form of “colonial imposition” (22). Given secularity’s role as a political ideology, largely benefitting the upper class as in the case of Larbi, religious revivals are often welcomed as a corrective, not only returning religious identities to the forefront, but also challenging class divisions, ethical frames, and current national politics.

Larbi’s secular voice, interrupted by Faten’s religious views, demarcates local and global viewpoints. Faten claims that we are “blinded by our love for the West,” valuing their foreign degrees and sending them the best students (43). Faten’s suspicion of the western world is not just borne out of a religious fervor; it is securely affixed against racist hierarchies, both modern and colonial, which have granted higher status to western than Moroccan culture. Typifying religious revivalism, her words indict the flight of young people—of economic and cultural capital—from Morocco to the West, a drain of resources that echoes the dynamics of colonization.

Embedded within this language of religious revival are reactions against contemporary and colonial loss. Faten’s grandfather had fought against the Spanish in the Rif War, and now, his granddaughter picks up the fight against western imperialism, first

as a religious response in Morocco, later as a spirited, gendered response when forced to survive through prostitution in Spain. This colonial history merits attention, for it elicited religious and political protest in the country. From 1921-1926, the Spanish colonized the Rif Valley, the northern region of Morocco, terrorizing the people with beheadings, amputations, and whippings; targeting them and their crops with chemical weapons; and demolishing a powerful resistance movement led by Abdil Krim. This historical legacy also feeds the fire of Faten's spirited resistance.

The reasons political Islam appeal to a youthful generation also appear through the elite doyenne Noura, following her choice of revival in response to the words of Faten. Reading about the Islamic brotherhood, Noura eventually dons a headscarf as a sign of her changing views and faith. But the reader must attend to this scene of new religious conversion with a nuanced lens, since the veil, the *hijab*—a symbol of religion and political identity when worn by Noura—has multiple layers of meaning. The veil is not a requirement for many families in Morocco; moreover, it is a choice made by women about how they see themselves in terms of piety and devotion to God, their focus on character, not external beauty, or as a sign of spiritual/political conservatism. When Noura announces that she will start wearing the hijab, Salma, her mother is shocked. Although her mother has always proclaimed her identity as a woman of the people—a lawyer and Islamic feminist, who takes a few human rights cases pro bono each year—she refuses to tolerate her own daughter's veiling. From an Islamic feminist perspective, only two verses in the *Qu'ran* address the scarf, states Salma, and the mother believes these verses about modesty were only for the "pagan times" (33). Times have changed, according to Salma; so also the need to wear a scarf.

But Noura has a different view, and her piety works as a form of female power. When Noura takes the moral high ground, challenging her father's liberal beliefs and her mother's ideas of Islamic feminism, she asks her parents if they believe that the *Qu'ran* is the "word of God" (33). Using a literalist hermeneutic, she defines her authority and female power to help her country in contrast to secular individualism and alternative religious stances. Indeed, in *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood argues that religious norms are "not simply a social imposition on the subject," because if selected these ethical practices can form the very "substance of her intimate, valorized interiority" (23). With specific expressions, convictions, and emotions, these selected virtues embody self-actualization and authorization. Veiling also signals a rebellion against her parents and elite practices. Her newly claimed identity in political Islam contrasts her parents and her own former lifestyle.

In a single family, then, Lalami depicts three belief systems—Islamic feminism, political Islam, and secular Islam. Within these confrontations, even as the father labels Noura's view as "your Islam" (40), the novel suggests that Lalami's depiction of religious belief offers options around the veil. When women describe their own choice of veiling or unveiling, they reject what Brinda Mehta calls the "negation of identity," an erasure of Muslim women due to stereotypes of oppressed women (*Rituals* 4). Indeed, veiling or unveiling is often simplified as the main political issue, but Fatima Mernissi suggests that Muslim women need to be considered not just in terms of religious invocation, but rather as a political group, who have not been included in key negotiations (2001, 21-22). Thus, Lalami's strategy of narrating Noura's choice of the *hijab* through the lens of her secular father makes the reader complete the interpretive

work. Why does this father react so vehemently against the veil? It is not just about religion, but about class: he dislikes his daughter looking like “some ignorant peasant” (34). Because he is ashamed of her, he stops talking about his daughter with his colleagues at work. Having sent his daughter to an elite, private French-speaking school, Larbi associates his veiled daughter with uneducated and rural women, and he stereotypes the veil as part of a “new breed of Muslim Brothers” with their “severe expressions” and “fists raised” (34). Thus, the headscarf in the heartland of an upper-class family showcases political and social rebellion through revivalism—part of religious, class, and generational dissent.

Why does her father fear this conversion to revival and Islamism? It is not only because political dissent can get you arrested in Morocco, there is also a sense that he is losing his daughter. At Ramadan, for instance—a feast laid out to celebrate the end of the first day of fasting—Noura rebels against her family, stating that they are not observing the rules correctly. She wants to break the fast only with water, then wait to eat until after the sunset prayer, the *maghrib* prayer. The family waits. But then she claims that the evening meal should be frugal—not this ““orgy of food”” (37). Her observance of legalism is also a fierce critique of her parents, a rebellion. Although they offer to wait for her, Larbi feels his “appetite melt away” (37). Noura eventually agrees to eat with them, they eat with neither friends nor conversation. Such splits in religious ideologies amidst waning parental beliefs fracture family bonds, part of Lalami’s criticism of complete overhauls within newfound conversions. Legalistic views of religion control how members of the family practice their beliefs. In fact, this practice of Islamism, as

deployed by Noura, constrains bonds of love and family allegiance, formerly held, prior to this conversion.

So while the importance of revival movements are showcased in this novella, Lalami also critiques the stifling influence of legalism on this family's former faith practices, and she also critiques potential hypocrisy and fatalism within political Islam. Larbi views Faten as hypocritical, since Faten encourages his daughter to pursue teaching, yet Faten is not willing to be a middle school teacher herself. She leaves her future in "God's hands," in a fatalistic sweep, which irritates the father. While Faten critiques corruption, this young fundamentalist also participates in this system. She asks for Noura to pass answers to her on the exam. The girls get caught cheating, and Faten fails the exams. Noura, despite her idealism, begs her father to help Faten stay in school. While Larbi previously helped other students out, when their parents offered bribes, he does not bend to his daughter's request. Both the father and his newly-devout daughter participate in the system of bribery—a critique of potential hypocrisy and corruption, which extends within two systems of belief, secular administrations and political Islam.

Both Islamists and other Muslims characters in Lalami's texts have potential practices of corruption; moreover, Noura is not the only one with shifting beliefs about religion since the secular perspective of Larbi changes over time as well. Even though he analyzes variations in his daughter's transformations, while criticizing the religious fervor of Faten, he remembers how he used to pray with prayer beads to focus on God. These beads have been given to him by his mother as a legacy piece, specially made of wood; they evince the fullness of the many names for Allah, including justice and mercy. But, at this later stage of his life, these beads have broken apart. It is a symbol of the

narrator's disintegration of faith, ethics, and carefully built family facade, which has scattered into pieces as well. He places the beads in a cup holder, "hoping to get them fixed later" (19). But all that remains of this prescient of sandalwood beads, once set aside for devotion, is just a broken string—a sign of declining ethics and faith.

But even though this father loses his spiritual devotion, that is not to say that Larbi does not hold strong religious views as well, for he does. He feels that his daughter and her friend are beautiful and should not be covered up. "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty, so why hide it beneath all that cloth?" (41). The father sees God's creation as lovely, and conservative views of the *hijab* are antithetical to his theology. Alarmed by the changes in his daughter, Larbi seeks more information about Faten, and remembers his own religious path. Nostalgically, Larbi recalls his deceased mother and her gift of prayer beads, now broken, like his former belief that "virtue and religion went hand in hand" (50). Larbi values his family, and he recognizes the way that family and faith values become enmeshed. For instance, Larbi's early devotion to his deceased mother (and her faith practices) juxtapose the broken bonds with his daughter (amidst her spiritual activism and her antagonism). Practices of devotion crenulate within these bonds of family—at times, rippling like patterns of fossils, at times, perambulating like haunted relationships, at times, scattering like prayer beads, held by many hands. Through his daughter's conversion, he reads his own ethical failure, donning favors in political administration. However, he persists in his continuing belief in the possibility of a righteous faith and his daughter's return to family practices—all part of Lalami's weave of faith and family—as these overlapping bonds and an unexpected conversion thread into a painful socio-political battleground.

De-Imperializing Revivals: Gender & Class Authorization

Unlike the chapter told from Larbi's perspective, when Faten is finally granted a voice in the chapter termed "The Odalisque," her voice shows her shifting beliefs about class and resistance to essentializing gender roles. Her faith practices have a high cost, for when the secret police overhear her criticism of the king, they mark her as a suspect, and she flees her homeland. But to avoid deportation from Spain, she must sleep with the guard at immigration. Framing her life, she still places it in a religious background, remembering how her spiritual leader, her imam, had stated that "extreme times sometimes demanded extreme measures" (141). But here, with no money and no one to look out for her as an immigrant, she has no imam to guide her. She thinks of her best friend, Noura, wondering if she still wears the hijab, since Noura has the "luxury of having faith" or "having no faith" because money offers choices (139). Here in Spain, however, her very survival on the streets depends on her abandoning her hijab. Her devout practices are abandoned out of necessity, and she recognizes how the freedom to practice faith also requires privilege, again citing resentment at class issues.

But her realization further shifts when one of her clients in the sex trade, a young Spaniard named Martín appears like a white savior. He offers to assist with her immigration papers towards citizenship. But Faten becomes unsettled by the ways that Islam and her body are both objectified. Martín compares her body to food, like black olives and mangoes, "like a dish," an object of exotic taste and desire (131). He presses her to narrate her life in false terms, as if she had been indoctrinated into the art of sexual

pleasure by a number of sisters, and wore an embroidered dress, a *caftan*. Whereas, she, as a single child, joined the Islamist party and wore her head scarf, to feel protected and part of a larger group. Her choice was a long denim skirt and sweater, not an embroidered dress. While the young man claims that he rejects his father's fascist views, Martín restricts her identity and faith as a form of orientalism—an imperialist view.

But, in an unexpected twist, Faten reclaims her identity through a tipping point of religion. When she searches in Martín's glove box, she finds a copy of the *Qu'ran*. After Faten reaches for the holy book of her faith, she is upbraided, told not to touch what is, for Martín, more of an icon than a sacred text. It is an ironic limitation, given Martín's lack of belief and knowledge of Islam. As the holy book becomes contested territory, Faten fully rejects his objectification of her and her faith. She tells him that she does not need his help, does not want to see him again. Her actions interrupt his reverie, his violent objectification of another. Not only resisting how Islam is judged by westerners, this encounter also further recognizes her right to interpret and claim the *Qu'ran*. Within this contested zone, her self-concept as a Muslim woman provides authority for Faten. This authorization recognizes her own importance, re-claims her own religious beliefs, recalls the complexity of her own history. Refusing to play into Martín's stereotypes, she rejects this relationship, reconceives her present situation, and rekindles her own ideas of herself. When she finds that the price of masking her own identity and perception of Islam is too high of a cost, even if it would result in a European passport, her tipping point of self-authorization is also a religious revival—an awakening, a form of resistance to oppression, a de-imperialization.

Following this debacle with Martín, there is not only clarity about skewed relationships of power, but also a critical shifting of faith and belief. In contrast to Martín's forbidden, holy book, we read about a small, pocket-size, *Qu'ran*, near the bed of Faten. In this place of intimacy, outside of her work, this holy book is dusty, not opened recently. Faten's holy book, with its dusty cover, signals her former religious conceptions. This novella, however, juxtaposes her unused scripture not only in contrast to her former piety and political idealism of Islamism, but, more markedly, in reaction against Martín's pretentious and guarded ownership of the holy book. Perforating this scene, the symbolism of her pocket-sized book, even with her dusty religiosity, remains outside of Martín, signaling a re-claimed, personal faith, within her own private space.

Following this image of personal identity and ownership—located in a pocket-sized scripture—another recognition emerges through a religious image, in the final scene, a celebration of *Eid*. Although Lalami does not specify which of the two Islamic holidays it is, details suggest that it is *Eid al-adha*, where a sheep or a goat is sacrificed to remember Abraham's devotion to God; a sign of his willingness to sacrifice everything, including his son. So, while Martín referred to her with language of mangoes and olives, her own claims around food, identity, and religion further reject his objectification, illuminate her own sacrifices for survival and her rekindled agency—an Abrahamic gesture. Buying the ingredients that she dreamed of when she was a teenager in the slums; sadly, she can finally afford the lamb, the sacrificial symbol of all that she has suffered, but she is far from her mother. Re-claiming her religious identity, outside of the imperializing gaze of Martín, her new claims are nostalgic, remembering her motherland, but her actions and perception of wealth shift. Acknowledging challenging

economics, the damage women experience at policed borders, she resists Martin's territorial claims and reclaims her own personal faith. This return to faith is distinct from political Islam, as her hopes change from the Moroccan state to her own self.

This religious revival includes self-authorization, feminist recognition, religious connection, and shifting convictions about class—a de-imperializing conversion. The final scene of celebration of Eid is markedly distinct from the dinner scene with Larbi and Nouri, where she is questioned about her economic status. Indeed, resentment over class infiltrates much of Faten's earlier words as she cites concern for the poor, contextualized within the five pillars of faith in Islam. In her return to faith, there is a shift in conversation, especially as class tensions manifest with her roommate, who works as a nanny, and considers herself better than her roommate, who is in the sex trade. But this tension diminishes with the personal revival of Faten, which is symbolized by her preparation of the Eid dinner. Celebrating with her roommate, Betoul, from whom she has been estranged, she cooks dinner for the two of them: a ritual of preparing, then celebrating a religious holiday in an unlikely community of exiles, building a final, sacred space. At Eid al-adha, then, Faten appreciates her roommate, who metaphorically speaks the truth about their lives, declaring the lamb a "bit salty, dear," an endearment amidst displacement in Spain, leaving Faten "grateful for the truth" (145). There is a generosity of spirit in this last scene, since Faten has given her a large amount of lamb. Even without formalized prayer, even without an imam's blessing, a renewal of faith and female community, a bond amidst exiles, despite class lines, revitalizes her beliefs. Faten's final identification is also a religious conviction. Even though unable to return to the politics of piety, her conversion, this time more personal than the Islamist platform,

rejects objectification by Martín's diminutive gaze even as it builds gendered bonds with Betoul across social lines. What this strategy suggests is a process of de-imperializing through faith.

Faten's conversion models alternate agency for women—alternative feminisms in plural and non-western forms. Navigating beliefs not only as sites of contention, Lalami's female protagonist Noura and Halima find distinct forms of agency within their revivals. In this next instance, the female protagonist Halima, a mother of three children, experiences a religious conversion. Unlike the examples of Faten and Noura, the religious revival of Halima extends beyond traditional Islam to practices with local healers and saints. Within this framework of personal conversions, Lalami navigates how Islamic practices are not only sites of modern Moroccan belief, but also intersections with a gendered, colonial, and national history. Within this paradigm of revivals, Faten, Noura, and, in the next instance, Halima, refuse western views of religion as limited to a suffocation of gender.

Traumatic Revivals: Magic, Saints, and Maternal Enshrinement

In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Halima Bouhamsa's story begins as a battered wife, a stereotype of an oppressed woman. But unlike the typology of the western narrative, where the oppressed Muslim woman finds freedom by moving to the West, Halima's liberation is not contingent on a life in Spain. This journey—a mother and her children crossing the Straits of Gibraltar, only to return, after being forced out by border guards, to a personal revival through her view of the miraculous—ultimately resists any silencing. Again, this paradigm of unexpected conversions, emergent around

female protagonists, begins with an orientalist image, refuses this typology, faces challenges across borders, and then the female character understands herself through an alternative lens of faith—resisting oppression.

This revivalist reading lens begins with a gap, an initial absence around the history of Halima Bouhamsa, as she enters the boat, and once again, hers is a story initially narrated by a rather secular perspective, a young Moroccan man in search of fortune, Murad. Since the boat ride across the Straits of Gibraltar is dangerous, Murad wonders why a mother would travel on this fraught journey with her three children. When her story is finally detailed, her decision to move to Spain resists stereotypes of passivity, as Halima selects action. But Halima's liberation is not contingent on relocation; instead, freedom eventually materializes from a surprising source—from a labyrinth of personal and communal beliefs.

Unfolding the story of Halima and her revival requires more than sorting through stereotypes; relationships between religion and state government need unpacking. Trying out ways to deal with her abusive husband, Halima wonders if she should trust the “courts or the magicians” (55). Gendered justice and opportunity—sought in these two extremes of the justice system or the magical power of witchcraft—need a bit more explanation, for why would judges or witches constitute equal selections? Lalami suggests ways women have turned towards alternative practices of belief, when state power fails them. To begin with, family law is more likely to be placed in a framework of Islamic practice, influenced by religious judiciaries in a system of sha’ria, more than other forms of legislation. While Moroccan women have long fought for increased rights, as noted in Lalami’s article in *Foreign Affairs* (2011), where she notices that the legal

code of 2004, known as *Mudawana*, offers rights of child custody, child support, and inheriting property; but some Moroccans felt "real change for women" had occurred, others felt it was not a major shift, since the "judges were not applying the new law anyway." Fearing that a court will not grant her a divorce, Halima visits a corrupt judge. When the judge threatens her, she realizes that she can't trust him. After the judge shoves her out, she fights back, elbowing him in a symbolic retaliation against corruption and stalemate of state justice.

Her next avenue involves a female healer, suggested by Halima's mother, Fatiha, who believes in handling a husband with emotional manipulation, or, failing that, with women's magic. This healer, who lives in the slums of Zenata, requires fifteen hundred dirhams, or about one hundred and seventy-five dollars, to meet with Halima, and to hear her story—a form of one-to-one counseling. She creates an individualized potion with elements from the woman's realm of the kitchen mixed with those of the husband's body—for example, hair or semen—to make a powder. This powder is mixed into a dough, since Halima is making *rghaif*, rounded, then fried bread. Eating this bread, the husband will change, according to Halima's mother. The magic, she says, will create a reversal of power, so that Maati will "become like a ring on your finger. You can turn it any way you want" (54). Thus, it is that metaphors of the ring and a loaf of bread—symbolic of economic wealth and food production—transfigure into desires of power through religious practices.

Women's magic is technically forbidden in the *Qu'ran* and often feared within the community; yet, in Morocco, these forms of ritual, textual and women's practices are often blended together and conceived by many female practitioners as Islamic practices.

For Halima, after she sprinkles the powder into the batter, she cringes when she hears the call to prayer, for her actions, her use of magic, she considers a "grave sin" (56). Seeking out witchcraft is a forbidden practice, not just on account of one verse in the *Qu'ran*, but because the magic changes the balance of gender power. It is believed capable of rendering a man silent, impotent, wrapped around a woman's finger—the utmost rebellion against gender roles, a desperate act of resistance. Indeed, during French and Spanish colonization, magic was invoked as resistance against the colonizers. Deborah Kapchan describes magic as women's words about "empowerment" in the face of "social impotence," and describes how religious invocations were forged in protection against those foreign devils in imperial times (1996, 236). Magic offers a different path, argues Kapchan, contesting patriarchal orthodoxies and empire.⁴

While much criticism has been written on women's use of magic for agency, Lalami's inclusion of magic does not bring change. Instead, Halima's transformation of faith comes after her traumatic attempt to flee her husband and cross to Europe, clandestinely, since she cannot get a visa.⁵ When the boat tips, she nearly drowns. With trauma, as defined by psychologist Judith Harmon, a survivor, like Halima, will "relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy" (Herman 1997, 52). After her traumatic experience, Halima seeks to redefine her sense of identity, reconsidering multiple relationships in a labyrinth of personal and communal beliefs. Indeed, the "militarization of borders" has created a "decentering of identity for the dispossessed," according to Brinda Mehta (*Rituals* 2007, 110). This traumatic journey eradicates identity, argues Taieb Belghazi, since documents are burned, leaving individuals neither citizen nor alien, but "in-between"; crossing on flimsy boats—"floating tombs"—many view themselves as

"economic martyrs" for their families (2012, 89; 88). The danger of crossing burns away one's former sense of safety and secured identity, and this sacrifice to preserve one's family envisions the straits of belief, amidst the traumatic rebirth of identities. In the case of Halima, this crossing imbues her conversion with ideas of divine intervention.

In Halima's conversion, she considers the possibility of spiritual intervention, long after the boat capsized. Halima's ten-year-old son, Farid, used a stick to pull his mother toward the shore, he rescued her, for she can't swim; however, this rescue story, after Halima is forced to return to Morocco, circulates after their trip. Many in the slums declare that her son Farid is a blessed child, even a "saint," and Halima's husband, Maati, believes his son's rescue of his mother is a "miracle" (114). After Maati shows up on her door step to hand her divorce papers, Halima wonders if her son has special powers, since he wished that Baba, his father, had divorced his mother early on, and his wish has come true? Feeling that only an act of divinity could get her husband to grant her freedom, Halima believes, for the first time in divine intervention, and wonders if there were other miracles that she overlooked because she was not "paying attention" (119). After this traumatic interlude, this very practical woman trusts divine intervention—a moment of conversion.

But despite her renewed faith, Halima's religiosity is selective. She discerns other misinterpreted instances that are mundane acts, not divine action. When her neighbor Khadija asks for a blessing from the young Farid, since her own son, Adnan, is in danger of failing his exams, the desire is for an easy solution. Although Halima suggests that Adnan needs to study more, play soccer less, maintaining her rational, hardworking approach, nonetheless, she requests that her son bless Adnan, because it brings

contentedness to Khadija. When Farid touches Adnan's head, he is an "unwilling saint" (121), not accepting a miraculous interpretation of himself. Ironically, the blessing does create a change, but not because of supernatural power. Rather, when Halima sees Adnan playing soccer, she scolds the boy and he returns home to study, and thus, Adnan passes his exam. This social belief in Adnan's miraculous good grades, despite being discredited by Halima, still does cultural work. In this case, the encounter of belief and doubt leads to economic profit: in exchange for the blessing, Khadija rewards the family with sugar. Thus, it is that this blessing, this encounter over belief, supernatural or not, leads to good, for Khadija's son passes his exam, and Halima, now a single mother, receives a measure of wealth. In Lalami's hands, then, Halima's conversion does not dissipate her cynicism. She rejects how belief can be an excuse for lack of action or a desire to escape: people "wanted others to help them out of their problems instead of relying on themselves" (126). Neither does she rule out belief, for there is no "point to living" if this practice is just about "survival" (115). Halima displays renewed self-confidence after her conversion, acknowledging divergences of beliefs with her neighbor Khadija, or between Halima and her mother Fatiha. There is no mention of her earlier self-doubts: former anxieties while cleaning the office of an upper-class lawyer, nor anger about the opportunities her brothers have in France—a change after her revival.

Instead of uncertainty over the beliefs of others, such as her mother and neighbor, Halima's conversion reflects a newfound certainty and ardent faith, caring for her mother and reflecting on her own motherhood during the time of Eid. Again, Lalami does not specify, but it is probably *Eid al-Fitr*, the celebration after fasting. This celebration is marked by *zakat*, giving alms to others, and with certain types of food—like the

pancakes, *beghrir*, she is selling in the market. In terms of zakat, Halima offers to pay for her elderly mother, Fatiha, to see a doctor and get new medicine for her arthritis, and this alternative type of alms-giving does not draw attention to Islam, but rather, it shows everyday actions of female integrity. In fact, Halima's beliefs are feminist: not based on the western concept of individual women breaking a glass ceiling, but rather, motherhood forming a blessed state in relation to one's son, a maternal feminism, which is not dismissive of women's domestic labor.

Herein, motherhood takes on a level of religious iconography. Symbolic of Ramadan's sense of sacrifice, Halima gives up much to find her freedom and work towards a life for her children—a godly act. Indeed, despite her pragmatism, she "surrenders" (125) to the belief that her child is a special blessing. As the kitchen becomes a sacred site, the pancakes, the *beghrir*, "break into bubbles," then the last of the sunlight cast shadows, "framing her body like the arches of a shrine" (126). After the hardship of being married to Maati has passed, like Ramadan with its challenge of being without food, the fast is broken with a revived faith, marked with bubbling pancakes sold as part of her small business, acts of kindness to her mother, and Lalami's shrine images, marking Halima as a contemporary saint. Her body, her actions, her mind, her struggle for opportunity for herself and her children—all sentimentally marked as maternal enshrinement and part of a liberatory pathway.

While religious glorification of motherhood insinuates traditional frameworks; in Lalami's hands, this revivalist view of maternal enshrinement becomes a political protest to resist western colonization. To explain this further, we must note that that the shrine is not merely a place of devotion in Morocco. When Moroccans travel to a shrine, it is not

just a journey of respect, but also a historical land claim. It is a return to their “local and collective histories,” remembering relatives of Sultan Idris II, believed to be descendants of the prophet Muhammad (Amster 6). These descendants—devoted to good works, renowned for their ideas or scholarship—are associated with spiritual and collective identity. When these saints die, their bodies, rooting and mixing into the ground, flowing into spaces around them with blessing and healing, reject colonial land claims; instead, connecting sovereign power and a “social corporality” (6). Popular pilgrimages to shrines of the saints, during colonial times, demarcated respect for local, not foreign, authority. Thus, as a figure of the shrine, Halima becomes part of a re-claiming of land and national identity. It is not the saving arms of European power, but an anti-immigration tale, where power, courage, and authority arise in an everyday saint in the city. Halima’s conversion rekindles her agency and her authority in her distinct beliefs from her mother and neighbor. Furthermore, her kindness towards her community and her ingenuity in finding a place of profit and residence become heroic symbols, marked by Lalami, as enshrinement.

Following the conversion of Halima, she recalls an important childhood pilgrimage with her mother, where she visits a sacred tree, the site of a shrine. When Halima was a child, Fatiha took her to find this sacred tree, rumored to heal, and after Fatiha collects some of the sap from the tree, she finds that her arthritis improves. But developers send a modern young man, his hair like that of an "American singer" (118) on television, who calls their faith superstition, detailing to the crowd that in terms of science this is just the blood-colored sap of a Eucalyptus.⁶ The people retort that he is a "foolish man," blind to the miraculous, who has "sullied this holy ground," since the

ground around the tree is referred to as a shrine (118). Why does this shrine motif matter? This sacred soil—associated with saints buried in the earth and bleeding trees that serve as intermediaries—implants hope, local spirituality, and ethics. Out of the roots of secular dismissals grows the enshrined importance of collective belief—a claim of local development and empowerment. Ultimately, her memory contains new meaning after her revival, and further grounds her in the importance of her life, her faith, her people, not in hopes of western re-location or development. Lalami's repeated sentimental images of shrines—first, referring to a bleeding tree visited during Halima's childhood, then as a sign of Halima herself—become signs of authorization, self-placement, a healing revival.

Why is the revival of Halima important? Because contemporary images suggest that all religions confine women, dominate their movement, or mute their intellect, in a way that is illogical and discrediting, and racist hierarchies, rooted in colonization, judged Islam as barbaric. Halima's beliefs, however, resist any singular orthodoxy—a refusal of dismissals. In terms of identity, religion is viewed as one piece amongst many in the tapestry of subjectivity, and women's beliefs in religion, as miriam cooke argues in *Women Claim Islam*, cannot be amalgamated into one fixed formula or set of practices (60). Thus, any study of religious identity in literature must consider the specific practices of characters, and these beliefs may be hurtful or integral to their overall agency. While literary criticism of Moroccan literature, more broadly, has followed practices of healing and women's magic as forms of female empowerment; Lalami's paradigm does not follow this precise pathway. Women's magic is not the source of empowerment. Rather, the unexpected conversions, wherein female characters resist the

oppression around them and select their own interpretation of religious agency, changes their self-actualization process.

Overall, this reading practice of unexpected renewals enshrines Halima as an ethical figure: an everyday saint whose concern for the poor challenges the high-rise capitalist growth, checking on the inequity of dysfunctional government. Like the bleeding tree, Halima's importance to the community grew, not necessarily by supernatural means, but within social recognition of her courage—a unique site of agency, spiritual complexity, and way of knowing. The quotidian sainthood of Halima rejects abusive situations, since her strength and choices resist domestic violence and border police, fighting physical and structural injustice, while never ruling out the miraculous. Indeed, these journeys of personal revivals do not necessarily tie to political parties, for both Halima and Faten, instead, unexpectedly, connecting to religious holidays, two distinct Eids.

Indeed, Islam is embodied in these women, less as a textual interpretation, a theology, or a political ideology, but more as a renewal of religious practice, personified through these two women, and their immersion into the ritual feasts of Eid al-adha and al-Fitr. Symbolic of these two Eids, not only are daily struggles and sacrifices of both Halima and Faten configured, but their sacrifices and strengths display identifications, not of victimization, but sanctified transfiguration. Their revival of religious practices, never simplified nor dismissed, rekindle identity and bonds with others for these unlikely saints. Elements of Eid—humble and spiritual terms related to surrender, sacrifice, and blessing—become tropes of feminism and power in Lalami's depiction of female protagonists. Despite facing extraordinary challenges, transported across local, state, and

international lines, these final portraits of an Islamic sisterhood alongside a single mother's sainthood enshrine perseverance, intelligence, and devotion within alternative kinships. After grueling journeys across borders, these sites of conversion, as shimmering lights of alternative feminism in a darkened sky of western representation, reflect subaltern community and sacred motherhood.

This alternative lens for reading images of gender and revival unlocks incarcerating images of the Muslim woman—a key to *de-imperialization*. Paying attention to female spirituality and unexpected conversions—especially as it relates to colonial and continual views of women and religion, as well as forms of agency aligned with ideas of feminism and citizenship—accentuates the importance of these reading strategies and their unexpected forms of faith renewal. Given that western representations of Muslim women are not fixed, indeed, Mohja Kahf argues, in *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, that during the Golden Age of Islam, western writing viewed Muslim women as subjects of high "rank and power," resourceful women, influential queens and wives, and at times, outspoken "termagants" (1999, 33); only later, sexualized as harem slaves or odalisques (8). Perhaps imagine, even for an instance, how a new paradigm of religious revivals, an alternative portrait of Muslim women, brightened with resilience and agency, lights the dark skies of endless warfare and objectification; a hopeful beacon, a new way of knowing, illuminated in the smallest shadows of unlikely saints and kindred sisters, candle-lit shadows amidst a novella's frame.

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¹ Overall, colonization created a system that was less democratic. Prior to colonialism, the land was ruled by the Sultans, and insurrections were held in check, negotiated by saints and scholars of Islam. But after the 1912 Treaty of Fez, French colonizers rejected the checks and balances of Sufi scholars and Islamic saints. Evident in the 1972 Constitution, the Moroccan sovereign held political roles and usurped religious leaders, declaring himself “commander of the faithful,” argues Sahar Bazzaz in *Forgotten Saints*, in a reinvention of history and sovereignty (2010, 5). The resistance hero’s full name is Muhammad Ibn 'Abd el-Karim El-Khattabi.

² French colonial doctors associated Islam with diminished intelligence and diseases like syphilis, bolstering their own claims of a civilizing and sanitizing conquest of the region (Amster 13).

³ Research indicates that Islamist politicians can step down if they do not win and will not be re-elected if they do not produce satisfying results (Tessler et al 1995, 159). Although religious movements can create challenges for women, Arab Spring is often an economic protest, and in many Muslim countries, the majority believe in more than one interpretation of the *Qu'ran*. (1995, 153). In fact, a 2011 survey of Islamic countries reported views on gender, including an “overwhelming support for democracy with the majority holding democratic values of tolerance, a wide range of politicians and perspectives, and women in the workplace (Tessler et al 2012, 96).

⁴ While there is men’s magic as well—the male *fqih* offers amulets with *Qu'ranic* verses to attract the supernatural power of God towards his desire—the sorceress, Kapchan stresses, is less tied to Islam and more “coercive” (238), since she offers a more violent change.

⁵ Clandestine migration, not illegal immigration, argues Abderrezak, more aptly indicates the political choices and policing around borders (2016, 13).

⁶ Sandra Harding argues that science is a feminist and postcolonial issue (2006, 2). On sites of modernity, religious identity, and shifting politics, see *Terrorist Assemblages* (Puar 2007).