

“I could right what had been made wrong”: Laila Lalami’s appropriation of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates Arab American novelist Laila Lalami (b. 1968)’s re-writing of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*, a travelogue that chronicles Spanish conquistador Panfilo de Narváez (1470–1528)’s expedition to claim La Florida to the Spanish crown in the sixteenth century. Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014) is a historical novel narrated by Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulssalam al-Zamori, a Moroccan slave known in Spanish annals as Estevanico/Estebanico, who was one of four survivors of the Narváez expedition and whose testimony, unlike those of his Castilian companions, was left out of the official record. As a postcolonial historical novel, *The Moor’s Account* recovers Mustafa’s voice and empowers him to narrate the adventures he undertakes in La Florida for eight years. The paper argues that in re-imagining and re-constructing Mustafa’s story, Lalami appropriates and adapts Aphra Behn’s seventeenth century novel *Oroonoko* (1688) which is one of the earliest English novels to foreground the themes of displacement and enslavement through relating the eponymous hero’s adventures in Surinam. Hence, this study is both analytical and comparative: on the one hand, the paper gives a close reading of Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account*; on the other hand, the paper highlights the similarities and differences between the two texts. The two novels attempt to recover the silenced voices of two African men / Moors who have traded in slaves and were themselves enslaved at a later point in their lives. At the same time, the two novels differ in their narrative techniques, representation of women and dénouements.

Keywords: adaptation, appropriation, Aphra Behn, Arab American Literature, Laila Lalami, *The Moor’s Account* (2014), postcolonial historical novel

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In telling this history, my companions began to modify its more damaging details [...] In this shortened and sanitized form, the chronicle of the Narváez’s expedition became suitable for the royal court, the cardinals and inquisitors, the governors and officials, and the families and friends they had left behind in Castile. (Laila Lalami, *The Moor’s Account*, p. 286)

Laila Lalami is an Arab American novelist who grew up in Morocco and received her higher education in the UK and the US. Currently, she is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside. Her novel, *The Moor’s Account* (2014) won an American Book Award from The Before Columbus Foundation, was also named a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. This paper investigates Lalami’s fictional account of Spanish conquistador Panfilo de Narváez’s expedition to claim La Florida to the Spanish crown in the first third of the sixteenth century. Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014) is a historical novel narrated by Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulsalam al-Zamori, a Moroccan slave known in Spanish annals as Estevanico/Estebanico, who was one of four survivors of the ill-fated mission and whose testimony, unlike those of his Castilian companions, was left out of the official record. Lalami interpolates historical discourse, shows its limitations and recovers Mustafa’s voice as he relates the adventures he undertakes in La Florida for eight years along with Spanish conquistadors Andrés Dorantes de Carranza (c. 1500 – c. 1550), Alonso del Castillo Maldonado (? – c. 1540?) and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (c. 1488 – c. 1560), the latter being the author of *La Relación*, (1542) a travelogue addressed and dedicated to King Charles V that chronicles the Narváez expedition.

In re-imagining and re-constructing Mustafa’s tale, Lalami’s novel appropriates and adapts Aphra Behn’s seventeenth century novel *Oroonoko* (1688) which chronicles the eponymous hero’s adventures in Surinam. In fact, the two novels attempt to recover the silenced voices of two African men / Moors who have traded in slaves, were themselves enslaved at a later point in their lives, renamed and despatched to the New World where each starts a new family and anxiously awaits the birth of a child. Notwithstanding the similarities in the plotlines of the two novels and the actual historical sources on which Behn and Lalami have founded their novels, there are obvious differences between the two novels. Firstly, while *Oroonoko*’s voice is mediated by that of the narrator, Lalami’s novel is narrated by the protagonist himself, adding a sense of immediacy and propinquity, and subsequently, creating a solid bond between the hero and the reader as the latter becomes privy to the former’s inner thoughts. Secondly, while Behn renders *Oroonoko*’s wife, Imoinda, silent, submissive and helpless, Lalami depicts Mustafa’s wife, Oyomasot, as resilient, enlightened and dynamic. Finally, the two novels end differently: while *Oroonoko*, who murders his pregnant wife to protect her from rape in case his revenge plan goes awry, is defeated and dismembered, Mustafa shrewdly finds a way to free himself and his pregnant wife from bondage.

Beside *The Moor's Account*, Lalami published two novels, namely *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) and *The Secret Son* (2009). In these two novels, Lalami presents the daily experiences of a number of Moroccan characters and highlights the socioeconomic, political and cultural matters that influence their lives. Lalami's fiction, to quote the words of Idrissi Alami (2013), depicts “a disparate confluence of complex identities affected by both local Moroccan and distant Spanish cultures as bound by centuries of relationships that continue to inform, and haunt, their collective cultural memory” (p. 150). In other words, Lalami's two novels reflect on how Morocco's geographical location and its long history of interaction with Europe decisively shape the identities of millions of Moroccans. In this context, Lalami's fiction explores issues of immigration, globalization and local political affairs and illustrates how these forces influence the lives of the characters depicted in these novels. Immigration, it should be noted, is a theme that permeates Lalami's novels as the migrant characters “refus[e] to settle down in original homeland and [are] aware of the continuation of the racist and ethnic thinking in their diasporic space” (Elboubekri, 2014, p. 263).

Unlike Lalami's previous two novels, *The Moor's Account* is a historical novel set in the sixteenth century. As a genre, to borrow the words of Dalley (2014a), “postcolonial historical novels ask to be read as serious interpretations of the actual past” (p. 52). This means that Lalami's novel seeks to re-interpret historical events through empowering marginalized people and foregrounding what may be deemed by the mainstream as insignificant incidents. In this sense, *The Moor's Account* re-writes historical events from the perspective of the disfranchised since it is narrated by Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulssalam al-Zamori, also known in Spanish annals as Estevanico/Estebanico, a Moroccan slave whose name was fleetingly mentioned in renowned Spanish conquistador Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*, a travelogue addressed and dedicated to King Charles V that chronicles the Narváez expedition in La Florida in the first third of the sixteenth century. In this sense, Lalami's book, to cite Dalley's words on the genre of the contemporary postcolonial historical novel, is “committed to producing meaningful knowledge of contested pasts” (2014b, p. 9).

In *The Moor's Account*, Mustafa was born to a Moroccan notary in the town of Azemmur in the year 903 of Hegira (around 1497 of Gregorian calendar).¹ He received his basic education at a local school in preparation for a future career his father had carefully planned for him as a notary. However, against his father's wishes, Mustafa decides to be a merchant, and in short time, he begins to trade in slaves. Soon, Azemmur is besieged by the Portuguese and Mustafa's life takes a downturn. His father dies, his uncles flee the town and he is left with the responsibility of feeding his two brothers, a divorced sister and an ageing mother. As the economic crisis tightens, Mustafa finds himself out of work and decides to sell himself into slavery. He hands in the money to his brothers, hoping that it will help them survive the ongoing harsh economic conditions.

Mustafa is shipped to Seville and is given the name of Esteban as he enters the service of Bernardo Rodriguez, a young fabric merchant. After five years, Bernardo sells Mustafa to settle some outstanding debts. The new owner, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, re-baptizes Mustafa as Estebanico and the two joins Panfilo de Narváez's expedition to explore the New World. The ill-fated expedition which consisted of six hundred men set sail in 1527, but after a year, only four survived: Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico and his master. For eight years, the four live among the Indian tribes, serve as physicians, get married and start new families. The four move from one tribe to another and are followed by hundreds of Indians who are enthralled by the four men's medical talents. Eventually, they come across

Spanish guards and are re-united with the Viceroy. While the three Spanish men are invited to officially deliver their testimonies, called the Joint Report, to the Audiencia of Santo Domingo, Estebanico is denied this honour but is lulled by his master’s repeated promises to set him free. Aware of Estebanico’s navigational and multilingual skills, the Viceroy buys Estebanico and employs him in a new expedition to invade the New World’s northern lands. However, worried about the future of his pregnant wife, Estebanico cleverly finds a way to run along with his wife from bondage.

As the above plotline shows, Lalami’s novel attempts to recover the silenced voice of Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulsalam al-Zamori. In other words, *The Moor’s Account* disrupts the hegemonic narrative of Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*. In this sense, Lalami’s historical novel “challenge[s] mainstream and repressive narratives” (De Groot, 2009, p. 3). By narrating the mis/fortunes of the Narváez expedition from the perspective of Estebanico who was not allowed to officially record his testimony, Lalami centralizes the marginalized and unsettles power structures that render the Moroccan man invisible. In this sense, Lalami attempts to re-write history from the margins since for many postcolonial writers, as C. L. Innes puts it, “history is the crucible out of which their fiction is fashioned” (2014, p. 823). In *The Moor’s Account*, the narrator, Mustafa announces from the outset that his narrative intends to “correct the details of history that was compiled” by Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Andrés Dorantes de Carranza (p. 3). While Mustafa shows respect for the three men, he insists that:

[U]nder the pressure of the Bishop, the Viceroy, and the Marquis of the Valley, and in accordance with the standards set by their positions, they were led to omit certain events while exaggerating others, and to suppress some details while inventing others, while I [...] feel free to recount the true story of what happened to my companions and me. (p. 3)

Mustafa’s words reveal that chronicling historical events is a site over which national, political, social and personal issues converge. Mustafa’s words illustrate how the documentation of the official history involves an endless process of editing and re-writing.

As a postcolonial novel, *The Moor’s Account* empowers the disfranchised and the marginalized. Mustafa, a Moroccan slave in the service of the Spanish crown, transforms the dominant discourse, and hence, asserts his presence and identity. To use Ashcroft’s (2001) words on strategies of cultural resistance taken by postcolonial subjects, Mustafa is not “swallowed up by the hegemony of the empire”, and hence, Lalami’s book “interpolate[s] the various modes of imperial discourse [...] to counter its effects by transforming them” (p. 14). In this context, Lalami’s historical novel blurs the boundaries between history and literature, and subsequently, “reveal[s] the fundamentally allegorical nature of history itself” (p. 15). Seen from this perspective, history, as Ashcroft rightly argues, “is a construction of language and of culture, and, ultimately, the site of struggle for control which post-colonial writing is in a particularly strategic position to engage” (p. 83). Ashcroft maintains that in order for postcolonial writers to interpolate history, they have to engage the medium of narrativity itself, and hence, “subvert the unquestioned status of the ‘scientific record’ by re-inscribing the ‘rhetoric’ of events” (p. 92).

Ashcroft’s words demonstrate how postcolonial writers can employ fiction to narrate their version(s) of historical events. In fact, Ashcroft’s words recall Selmon’s (1988) comments on the process of “transforming our inherited notions of history” (p. 159). Selmon argues:

[A]nd the extent to which we are able to see history as language, as discourse, as a way of seeing, or as a code of recognition is also the extent to which we are able to destabilise history’s fixity, its givenness, and open it up to the transformative power of imaginative revision. (p. 159)

Selmon’s last few words highlight the importance of re-imagining historical events and re-interpreting them. Thus, the postcolonial historical novel becomes an expedient vehicle for re-envisioning historical episodes and representing them from the perspective of the marginalized and disfranchised. In this sense, Mustafa’s narrative disrupts the official version of history that renders him invisible.

In fact, Mustafa’s insistence on faithfully chronicling the historical events he participated in and witnessed recalls Aphra Behn’s declaration at the outset of her novel, *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* (1688) to tell the story of the eponymous hero without embellishment:

I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero, [...] nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents but such as arrived in earnest to him: and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues. (p. 9)

The narrator takes pains to convince the reader that she is “an eye-witness to a great part of the events and what she could not be witness of, she received from the mouth of Oroonoko himself” (p. 9). In this sense, Behn, as Rosenthal (2004) succinctly puts it, “manipulates the narrative’s point of view to offer the perspectives of distinct narrative voices” (p. 164). According to Rosenthal, one of these perspectives belong to Oroonoko “who tells his story to the narrator in the style of heroic romance befitting his character”, while the other perspective is that of “an elite young woman who admires Oroonoko [...], but who also betrays him” (p. 164).

However, despite her unwavering commitment to accuracy and precision in recording the African prince’s history, the narrator excuses herself to “omit, for brevity’s sake, a thousand little accidents of his life” (p. 9). This decision, one may argue, echoes Mustafa’s words on how the three Spanish noblemen have omitted, exaggerated, suppressed and even invented some details (Lalami, p. 3). Indeed, there are enough thematic and structural commonalities between the two novels since each tells the story of an African man / Moor who at first trades with Europeans in slaves before he becomes a victim of the very trade that reinforces his social status in his homeland. In addition, as the two men are enslaved, they are renamed and shipped to the New World where they futilely seek to return to their homelands. Moreover, while in the New World, each of them gets married and anxiously awaits his wife to give birth. In this sense, in reconstructing and re-imagining Mustafa’s narrative, Lalami appropriates and adapts Behn’s *Oroonoko*, one of the earliest English novels that foreground the themes of enslavement and displacement.

But the differences between the two literary works are numerous, and significantly, they reflect the differences between a Eurocentric text written in the seventeenth century by an English woman and a novel written in the twenty first century by a Moroccan American woman. To borrow the words of Sanders (2006) on appropriations, Lalami’s book “affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new product and domain” (p. 26). While *The Moor’s Account* borrows some thematic and structural features from *Oroonoko*,

it transforms and transposes these elements. In other words, Lalami’s novel is a postcolonial piece of work in which Africans seek to “write themselves into a historical narrative of their own construction” (Innes, 2014, p. 825). In this sense, in addition to re-writing the original source of her novel, namely Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*, Lalami engages with Behn’s *Oroonoko* in a way that redresses some of the representational oversights, mistakes and gaps in the novel. Behn’s ambivalent position is eloquently expressed by Lipking (2004) who stipulates that Behn’s novel “may demean Europeans, but foreseeably shares a superiority over the wretched” (p. 178).

Seen from this perspective, Lalami’s novel attempts to rectify the representational lapses in *Oroonoko* by appropriating and adapting its narrative technique, representation of women and dénouement. While Oroonoko’s voice is mediated by that of the narrator, Lalami’s protagonist narrates his adventures directly, adding a sense of immediacy and creating an intimate relationship with the reader as the latter becomes privy to Mustafa’s inner thoughts. Secondly, while Behn renders Oroonoko’s wife, Imoinda, as silent, submissive and helpless, Lalami depicts Mustafa’s wife, Oyomasot, as resilient, enlightened and dynamic. Finally, notwithstanding the actual historical events on which the two works are founded, *The Moor’s Account* and *Oroonoko* end differently: while Oroonoko murders his pregnant wife to protect her from rape and is eventually defeated and humiliated, Mustafa slyly finds a way to free himself and his pregnant wife from bondage. Lalami’s book is a historical novel that re-writes history through appropriating and adapting a canonical and foundational text of English literature. As Dalley (2014b) succinctly points out, “the contested nature of postcolonial pasts prompts novelists to frame their work vis-à-vis norms of plausibility, verifiability, and the dialogue with archives and alternative accounts” (p. 9).

The Moor’s Account re-writes Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación* and draws on Behn’s *Oroonoko*. In re-imagining and re-constructing Mustafa’s adventures in the New World, Lalami appropriates and adapts Behn’s novel. To use Sanders’s words on appropriation once more, Lalami’s novel presents “a wholesale rethinking” (p. 28) of *Oroonoko*. To start with, Oroonoko and Mustafa are African men / Moors. The first is a prince from Coramantien which has slave trade links with Europe (p. 13). Behn describes Oroonoko as a multilingual “gallant Moor” and points out that a Frenchman “took a great pleasure to teach him morals, language, and science” (p. 14). For Behn, Oroonoko is different from other Africans since his colour is lighter:

His face was not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation are, but of perfect ebony, or polished jet [...] His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the negroes. (p. 15)

Behn’s description of Oroonoko, as Todd (2003) puts it, “can be read as a simple desire to make him distinct, other, the cynosure of all noble men” (p. xxv). Todd insists that Oroonoko “recalls the Moorish or Turkish stereotype of a character in whom the common European urge to power is presumed without European checks, to the destruction of himself and those around him” (xxxiv). Moreover, this description makes one think of Oroonoko as a north African, i.e. a Moor. Over the years, Oroonoko has sold African slaves to European merchants (p. 36), and eventually, he becomes a victim of this trade as an English captain enslaves him and a group of his men (p. 37). Despite the English captain’s reiterated promises of setting him free, Oroonoko is shipped to the New World and re-named Caesar (p. 43); ironically, he retains his royal status: “[H]e endured no more of the slave but the name, and remained some days in the house, receiving all

visits that were made him, without stirring towards that part of the plantation where the Negroes were” (p. 44).

The similarities between Oroonoko and Mustafa are quite clear. Mustafa is a Moor from the town of Azemmur. Just like Oroonoko, Mustafa received his education at a local school in his hometown: “I had eventually learned the principles of Arabic grammar, memorized the Qur’an, and was ready to graduate from the *misd*” (p. 58). Similar to Oroonoko, Mustafa trades in slaves: “[I]t no longer mattered to me what it was I sold, whether glass or grain, wax or weapons, or even, I am ashamed to say, especially in consideration of my later fate-slaves” (pp. 60-61). As the economic situation worsens in Azemmur, Mustafa sells himself as slave for fifteen reais (p. 83). His description of how he has become a slave is quite heartrending: “A soldier led me to the lower deck, where I was shackled to other men, facing the row of women, with children in between us [...] And everywhere, everywhere, hung the stench of bondage and death” (p. 83).

In Seville, Mustafa is baptised and given the name of Esteban (p. 109). After five years in the service of his master, Bernardo Rodriguez, Mustafa is exchanged for a debt owed to Andrés Dorantes de Carranza: “I had entered the Casa de Contratación as Esteban, but I left it as Estebanico. Just Estebanico – converted, orphaned, and now dismissed with a boy’s nickname” (p. 149). Like Oroonoko, Mustafa is multilingual (p. 111). Just like Oroonoko who is reunited with his beloved Imoinda in the New World, Mustafa gets married to Oyomasot, the daughter of the cacique of one of the Indian tribes, who later, like Imoinda, gets pregnant. In fact, in the New World, like Oroonoko, Mustafa is just a slave in the name. At one point, when Mustafa asks his master to give him a document that confirms his release from bondage, the latter tells him: “You are one of us, you know that” (p. 274).

As the above similarities show, in re-constructing and re-imagining Mustafa’s life, Lalami draws on Behn whose “achievement in *Oroonoko* makes her an important predecessor of a line of renowned female novelists” (Todd, 2003, p. xxxiii). But these similarities should not blind us from the obvious differences between the two novels. In fact, the narrative technique, the representation of women and the dénouement are three areas that Lalami pronouncedly transforms. As one of the first English novels, the narrative voice in *Oroonoko* is crude and confusing. Much has been written about Behn’s employment of narrative technique. For instance, Rosenthal highlights how Behn manipulates narrative voices in her novel:

Thus Behn introduces a narrator within a narrator, a relationship between Oroonoko and the primary narrator that involves stories, within the novel’s fiction, that he tells to her, that she will in turn tell to us. Sometimes we even have a narrator within a narrator within a narrator [...] Yet Behn also includes a synthesizing, semi-omniscient authorial voice that differs from that of the narrator, for certain events take place that none of the three story-telling characters witness. (p. 157)

The existence of “multiple narrators” and their continuous intervention in relaying and commenting on the events creates a distance that, to a some extent, alienates the reader from Oroonoko. The narrative technique that Behn employs renders Oroonoko “less knowable and more ambiguous” (Todd, 2003, p. vvii). This is clear, for instance, in the following quotation where the voice of the narrator occludes any possible identification between the reader and Oroonoko:

I have often seen and conversed with this great man, and been a witness to many of his mighty actions; and do assure *my reader*, the most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man, both for greatness of courage and mind, a judgment more solid, a wit more quick, and a conversation more sweet and diverting. (p. 14, emphasis added)

The Oroonoko that the reader meets is wholly constructed by the narrator’s imaginations, prejudices and limitations. In a way, this is the narrator’s Oroonoko, and hence, the relationship between the reader and Oroonoko is mediated by the narrator’s attitudes and impressions.

In fact, a distance is created and maintained throughout the narrative between the reader and the protagonist. This distance is further reinforced because of the narrator’s continuous apologetic statements highlighting her unworthiness of writing the chronicles of this great warrior:

But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame; though I doubt not but it had lived from others’ endeavors if the Dutch, who immediately after his time took that country, had not killed, banished, and dispersed all those that were capable of giving the world this great man’s life much better than I have done. (p. 43)

The narrator’s persistence to belittle her status as a storyteller has an unintended effect of demeaning the hero himself whose tale is being relayed, and hence, distancing the reader from him. In fact, the novel’s last paragraph greatly contributes to widening the gap between the reader and the African prince: “Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime wit than mine to write his praise. Yet, I hope, the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive all the ages” (pp. 76-77). As this quotation suggests, the novel turns to be about the narrator’s in/ability to memorialize Oroonoko rather than about his mis/fortunes per se. In other words, the closing paragraph of the novel encourages the reader to identify with the narrator rather than Oroonoko.

Behn’s narrative technique may be contrasted with that of Lalami since in her novel the eponymous hero’s voice is clear, unmediated and uninterrupted. As the novel opens, Mustafa positions himself as an honest man who is aware of his limitations as a storyteller narrating events that took place a few years ago. By opening his narrative with this statement, Mustafa gains the reader’s confidence and presents himself as a trustworthy narrator:

Because I have written this narrative long after the events I recount took place, I have had to rely entirely on my memory. It is possible therefore that the distances I cite might be confused or that the dates I give might be inexact, but these are minor errors that are to be expected from such a relation. (p. 3)

In spite of the fact that historical novelists, as Clendinnen (2006) puts it, project back into their “carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and current obsessions” (pp. 27-28), the narrator in the above quotation is both credible and persuasive. He is fully aware of the complexity of the process of telling a tale, and hence, he lets the reader know that the tale he is about to relate is not entirely free from lapses of memory. Mustafa is “establishing a bond with the reader” (MaKay, 2011, p. 41) through making the reader privy to his shortcomings and faults.

Mustafa directly addresses the reader and makes them aware of his secret feelings and inner conflicts. For instance, when Señor Dorantes asks Mustafa to narrate to him how he ended up in Seville, Mustafa addresses the reader directly in a way that makes the reader the immediate recipient of his words:

Reader, the joy of a story is in its telling. My feet were throbbing with pain and my stomach was growling with hunger [...] Telling a story is like sowing a seed – *you* always hope to see it become a beautiful tree, with firm roots and branches that soar up in the sky. (p. 124, emphasis added)

Mustafa is a smart narrator who knows how to endear himself to the reader. The sense of immediacy and propinquity he manages to weave throughout the narrative helps consolidate his credibility and authority as a narrator. In other words, through addressing the reader directly, the narrator establishes a rapport that eventually makes the reader empathize and identify with him; in short, the reader becomes Mustafa's secret sharer and confidante.

The two different narrative strategies that the two novelists follow influence the way the reader perceives the protagonist in each literary work. Since Oroonoko's opinions and thoughts are mediated by the narrator's voice, the reader is not privy to Oroonoko's inner emotions and feelings. For instance, when Oroonoko is informed about the ostensible death of his beloved, Imoinda, the narrator conveys his reaction in the following manner:

[T]hat henceforth he would never lift a weapon, or draw a bow, but abandon the small remains of his life to sighs and tears, and the continual thoughts of what his lord and grandfather had thought good to send out of the world, with all that youth, that innocence and beauty. (p. 33)

Had this very paragraph been narrated by Oroonoko himself, the reader would have had a first-hand experience of the protagonist's psychological torment and torture since this is one of the most significant moments in Oroonoko's life. In other words, the reader's sense of Oroonoko's anguish is deflated by the narrator's mediating words. In this way, the narrative technique that Behn employs substantially restricts the reader's comprehension of Oroonoko's inner pains.

Instead, the narrator focuses on Oroonoko's heroism, bravery and fighting skills, and hence, diverts the reader's attention from the African prince's anguish and agony. For instance, when the narrator describes Oroonoko's prowess in fighting a fierce tiger (p. 53), the reader's attention is drawn to Oroonoko's physical strength at the expense of the hero's inner feelings. Ultimately, one may argue that the reader may admire Oroonoko's physical strength but has no clue into what goes inside his mind or heart: Oroonoko remains an inscrutable enigma. On the other hand, the narrative technique Lalami employs consolidates the relationship between the reader and the narrator. When the narrator unveils his anxieties and expectations, he directly addresses the reader, and hence, cements the bond between the two. For instance, after being adrift for long time in the sea, Mustafa and his companions spot an island. Mustafa relishes this moment and shares his relief and joy with the reader: “So you can imagine, *gentle reader*, how relieved we were to find another island” (p. 158, emphasis added). Elsewhere, the narrator makes the reader privy to his inner feelings when he reveals how he has allured his wife, Oyomasot: “Reader, beware: the things you say to impress a beautiful woman have an odd way of being repeated to you when you least expect them [...] I was still trying to attract Oyomasot's notice”

(p. 236). Mustafa lets the reader have a peek into his personal affairs as he shares with the reader how he has fallen in love with Oyomasot.

Moreover, Mustafa’s physical strength is eclipsed by his mental abilities. During their peregrinations in the wilderness, Mustafa makes a number of important suggestions that prove vital to the expedition’s survival. After all, it is Mustafa who becomes the “head physician” and whose medicinal skills make the four adventurers famous and rich. It is actually Mustafa who expresses his apprehension when the number of Indians who are following them substantially increases. The others are not as far sighted as Mustafa to see the repercussions of this increase: “I grew worried. This will not turn out well, I said to Oyomasot one morning” (p. 243). Mustafa is provident and foresighted. One may be tempted to argue here that Mustafa is Oroonoko’s foil: while the African prince is a mighty warrior, Mustafa has no fighting skills. Unlike Oroonoko, whose mental aptitude does not match his physical strength, Mustafa is witty, imaginative and resourceful.

The representational differences between Oroonoko and Mustafa parallel those between their wives, Imoinda and Oyomasot, respectively. In *Oroonoko*, Imoinda is portrayed as a silent and submissive housewife whose fate is dictated by the desires of two powerful men, the Coramantien’s king and Oroonoko. In contrast, Oyomasot, is depicted as a dynamic, articulate and perceptive woman. She may be contrasted with Imoinda, whose beauty outshines what she does or says. In other words, unlike Oyomasot, Imoinda is the embodiment of the submissive housewife whose fate is determined by powerful men. As Ferguson (1991) rightly argues, “Imoinda is doubly enslaved – to the whites, male and female, who have bought her and also, as the narrative insists, to her black husband” (p. 169). Behn, Ferguson maintains, represents Imoinda “as the property, body and soul, of her husband” (p. 169). Ferguson concludes that by victimizing and annihilating Imoinda, “the white woman’s book is born, quite starkly, from the death and silencing of black persons, one of them pregnant” (p. 172). In other words, in order for the English woman to survive and thrive, the black woman must die. As Todd (2003) succinctly puts it, “Imoinda is decorative and exotic” (p. xxxii).

Behn imbues Imoinda with an aura of mythical beauty, describing her as “the beautiful black Venus” (p. 16). When Oroonoko first sees Imoinda, he is “infinitely surprised at the beauty of this fair Queen of Night, whose face and person was so exceeding all he had ever beheld” (p. 16). At the royal court, people “speak of nothing but the charms of that maid” (p. 17). When the king hears about her beauty, he sends her the royal veil, a sign that means that she has become his. When informed about the king’s plan, she just weeps silently: “[H]er heart was bursting within, and she was only happy when she could get alone, to vent her griefs and moans with sighs and tears” (p. 22). Even when Oroonoko manages to secretly enter the seraglio, Imoinda is depicted in a way that foregrounds her fragility and frigidity; in a way, she is like sleeping beauty who awaits prince charming to awaken her: “The prince softly wakened Imoinda, who was not a little surprised with joy to find him there; and yet she trembled with a thousand fears” (p. 29). Behn’s description of what happens between the two suggests that Oroonoko is raping Imoinda: “[H]e [Oroonoko] soon prevailed, and *ravished* in a moment what his old grandfather had been endeavoring for so many months” (p. 29, emphasis added).

When Imoinda even expresses her joy of being “ravished” by Oroonoko and vows her loyalty and faithfulness to him, her words to Oroonoko are reported to the reader by the narrator; Behn does not quote what Imoinda exactly says to her lover: “’Tis not to be imagined [...] the vows she made him, that she remained a spotless maid till that night” (p. 29). When the guards sent by the king knock on the door, Oroonoko clearly tells them that Imoinda is his tonight and

tomorrow she will be the king's. Imoinda seems to be a commodity that Oroonoko and the king divide between them: “Therefore, stand back, and know, this place is sacred to love and me this night; to-morrow 'tis the king's” (p. 29). Imoinda is defined by and bound up with, to quote Ferguson's words, “ideologies of property possession” (p. 169), and hence, is rendered silent, passive and submissive. The Imoinda-as-commodity image is reinforced by the fact that the king decides to sell her off rather than kill her as a punishment for her transgression and treason (p. 31).

Even after Imoinda is re-united with her beloved hero in Surinam, she remains silent and voiceless. Apart from the fact that she almost kills the tyrant deputy governor Byam with a poisoned arrow, Imoinda plays no great part in the progress of the events. This is best illustrated towards the end of the novel. When Oroonoko realizes that his efforts to free himself and his pregnant wife from bondage are futile, Oroonoko decides first to kill his wife and then take revenge on his captors: “He considered, if he should do this deed, and die either in the attempt or after it, he left his lovely Imoinda a prey, or at best a slave to the enraged multitude; his great heart could not endure that thought” (p. 71). As Ortiz (2002) succinctly puts it, “Imoinda's susceptibility to impregnation makes her the site on which both Oroonoko and the British empire stake their claims of authority” (p. 133). When Oroonoko talks to Imoinda about his decision, he “find[s] the heroic wife faster pleading for death than he was to propose it, when she found his fixed resolution; and, on her knees, besought him not to leave her a prey to his enemies” (p. 71). Once again, Behn refuses to give Imoinda the chance to express her thoughts and opinions, and instead, the narrator reports Imoinda's words to the reader.

Unlike silent Imoinda, Oyomasot is daring and cannot be silenced. The first time we meet her, we realize that she is a self-reliant woman who refuses to be intimidated by Mustafa who offers to help her pull down a rope from a mulberry tree on which it was stuck (pp. 226-227). In the conversation that ensues, Oyomasot is assertive, authoritative and self-confident. Mustafa has fallen in love with her precisely because of these traits: “From the start, what struck me about Oyomasot was that she did not care [...] that her father and mother disapproved of her wandering off alone” (p. 228). For instance, when her mother rebukes her for leaving her brother's furs hanging on their racks during the storm, Oyomasot refuses to be hushed and defends herself eloquently:

Why did he not bring them in from the rain? Oyomasot asked. She said this in a level tone, but that only made her mother angrier.

That was your duty, not his.

He would rather get wet than bring them in himself? (229)²

Oyomasot is also resourceful and articulate. When Mustafa and his companions fail to convince the Indians to go back to their lands because they cannot guarantee their safety since the alcalde and his men turn out to be insincere and unscrupulous, it is Oyomasot who steps up to the plate and persuades the Indians to disperse.

Oyomasot refuses to be ignored and neglected, especially when the decision to be taken pertains to her life. For instance, when the possibility of returning to Europe, via New Spain, has arisen, Oyomasot is frustrated because Mustafa has never asked her about her opinion on this issue (p. 253). Moreover, she encourages her husband to free himself from bondage and warns him not to believe Señor Dorantes's promises. She awakens him from his lull: “What you want is not something that can be asked for, it can only be taken” (p. 296). Oyomasot entices Mustafa to revolt against his master. Unlike the docile and acquiescent Imoinda, Oyomasot is a freedom

fighter who inspires self-determination and self-respect. She indeed motivates him to plan an escape plot. Once Mustafa finds out that his wife is pregnant, he makes up his mind to secure their freedom. In this context, the pregnancy of the two women and the prospects of the arrival of a new member of the family may be viewed as a catalyst for change and transformation.

Unlike Oroonoko who murders his pregnant wife for fear that his plan to take revenge on his captors goes awry, and hence, his wife becomes susceptible to rape and abuse, Mustafa takes his wife’s pregnancy as a good omen to seek freedom rather than to finish her life: “At last a good omen, I replied. [...] We had to use other means” (p. 307). Mustafa is smart enough to comprehend the rules of the game. Interestingly, he uses “we” rather than “I”. Unlike Oroonoko who decides on behalf of his wife, Mustafa shares his plan with his wife. In this context, it is interesting to see how Oyomasot’s pregnancy has a positive effect on Mustafa. In contrast, Imoinda’s pregnancy has an ominous influence on Oroonoko:

[S]o that he began to suspect them of falsehood, and that they would delay him till the time of his wife’s delivery, and make a slave of that too: for all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong. This thought made him very uneasy, and his sullenness gave them some jealousies of him. (p. 48)

Unlike resourceful Mustafa, warrior Oroonoko revolts against his captors. When he was abandoned by his followers, Oroonoko kills his pregnant wife before starting his plan to murder Byam. His attempt fails; he is humiliated and dismembered.

In this context, Richards’s (2013) analysis of Oroonoko’s dismemberment is quite revealing. Richards argues that “Behn’s narrator produces a body in pain in order to create a fiction of power, both the narrator’s own power as well as the power of fiction itself” (p. 668). Richards maintains that the pipe that Oroonoko requests to ease his pain as their captors torture him, practically “serves to silence him and to eliminate any possibility of a more definitive statement of his sentiments, of letting the reader know what *Oroonoko* is actually about” (p. 671). On the other hand, by the end of Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account*, Mustafa is neither humiliated nor silenced. On the contrary, he slowly develops a plan to escape along with his pregnant wife and, significantly, he discusses it with her:

Are you sure your plan will work?
Yes.
You have made promises before.
It will be different this time, I said. You will see. (p. 304)

Mustafa’s plan is quite simple and smart. When he was sent with a small expedition in search of the Seven Cities of Gold, he convinces the people in charge of the expedition that he and his wife along with the Amigos should precede the expedition. Mustafa was to send back a group of Amigos with a signal as he proceeds. Mustafa’s plan succeeds and when he sends back the last group of Amigos with a signal, he triumphantly announces: “At last, I was free of the Amigos [...] And my involvement with the empire was finally over” (p. 316). Mustafa and Oyomasot begin their journey home to the land of Avavares, his wife’s tribe (p. 320).

Behn and Lalami take pains to present historical accounts of stories of enslavement and displacement. In these two novels, borders between history and fiction are blurred, confirming Clendinnen’s (2006) stipulation that the historical novel is a site over which “the primarily

aesthetic purpose of fiction and the primarily moral purpose of history” uneasily converge (p. 34). As the above analysis demonstrates, the two novels have given historical accounts of the mis/fortunes of two African men / Moors who were enslaved, re-named and shipped to the New World. Notwithstanding the actual historical events that Behn and Lalami have attempted to portray, the dénouement of each novel reflects its proclaimed goal. Behn declares at the outset of her novel that she wants to give the reader the history of a prince whom she saw in person and was charmed with his character (p. 13). Lalami’s novel re-writes Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación* from a Moroccan slave’s point of view. To re-construct Mustafa’s narrative, Lalami draws on Behn’s novel, *Oroonoko*, and in the process she adapts and appropriates some of the novel’s features including its narrative technique, presentation of women and dénouement. Behn adamantly proclaims that she is recording the history of Oroonoko as she eye-witnesses part of the events and hears the remainder from the hero himself. In other words, Behn presents herself as a historian who ostensibly chronicles events without embellishment.

On the other hand, as a postcolonial historical novel, Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* seeks to fill in the gaps, correct history and present the point of view of the marginalized:

And in this relation I tried to tell the story of what really happened when I journeyed to the heart of the continent. The servants of the Spanish empire have given a different story to their king and their bishop, their wives and their friends. The Indians with whom I lived for eight years, each one of them, each one of thousands, have told yet other stories. Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought. (pp. 320-321)

In addition to reiterating the idea that Mustafa’s narrative is unembellished whereas that of his Spanish companions is heavily edited, the last few words of the above quotation assert that history, to quote Ashcroft once more, “is a method rather than a truth [...], an institutional formalization of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives” (p. 86). In this sense, Mustafa’s words, and indeed Lalami’s novel, interpolate historical discourse, “disrupt[t] its discursive features and reveal the limitations of the discourse itself” (p. 103). In short, as a postcolonial novel, *The Moor’s Account*, to quote the words of Selmon on how postcolonial novels transform history, “proceed[s] beyond a ‘determinist view of history’ by revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a concept” (p. 159). Through appropriating and re-writing *La Relación* and *Oroonoko*, Lalami seems to adopt as a mantra Mustafa’s words which are quoted in the title of this paper: “I could right what had been made wrong” (p. 296).

Notes

1. It is noted that throughout the narrative, the novelist uses the Hegira calendar rather than the Gregorian one. I believe this is a strategy that the novelist employs to re-write history from a non-European perspective.
2. Lalami does not use quotation marks when a character speaks. One interpretation of why she resorts to this technique is that because Mustafa, the narrator, has written the story long after the events he recounts took place, and therefore, he relies entirely on his memory (p. 3). This virtually means that the words she uses are not exactly the ones spoken by the characters. By not using quotation marks, Mustafa shows his limitations as a narrator and presents himself as a credible and scrupulous man.

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