



Speaking Across Borders: Language, Migration, and Postcolonial Identity in the Fiction of Laila Lalami and Boualem Sansal

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Abstract

*This article studies the politics of language in North African migrant fiction through a cross-textual reading of the works of Laila Lalami and Boualem Sansal. Language, the article argues, particularly in the postcolonial era, does not simply function as a communicative medium, but as a discursive space where political meanings of power, identity, memory, resistance, and societal critique are continuously negotiated. The study adopts a postcolonial framework to explore how both writers engage with the wor(l)ding of colonial and postcolonial experiences that constitute a major concern of migrant fiction. Lalami and Sansal write in foreign languages — English and French respectively — which are both considered linguistic legacies of colonialism in different parts of the world; hence, their multilingual narrations, code-switching, and stylistic choices are of paramount importance for a well-founded understanding of their literary engagement with colonial legacies and postcolonial sociopolitical realities in their home and host countries. Across Lalami’s fiction (mainly *The Moor’s Account*), language serves the purpose of restoring silenced histories, functioning as a repository for cultural memory, and as an intermediary through which hybrid identities are negotiated across borders. By contrast, Sansal gives a fractured and politically charged presentation of language that reveals alienation, failed integration, ideological manipulation, manifest discontent with the past, and the lingering effects of colonial and postcolonial violence. This article shows that the interaction between Arabic, French, English, Spanish, and local vernaculars in North African migrant fiction leads to a language pluralism which embodies the persistent yet ruptured conditions of migrant subjectivities. In the end, it demonstrates that the literary expression of displacement, belonging, and postcolonial resistance continues to be mediated through language.*

1. Introduction

Although Lalami and Sansal write from different geographical and geopolitical locations, their writings converge around a shared concern: how language bears the weight of history, migration, and disrupted forms of identity. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, *The Moor’s Account*¹, and *The Other Americans*², Lalami has cultivated a language that is clear and

¹ Lalami, Laila (2015). *The Moor’s Account*. Great Britain: Periscope.

² Lalami, Laila (2019). *The Other Americans*. London: Bloomsbury Circus.

deceptively straightforward — a kind of modern prose that consistently opens onto other linguistic and semantic worlds: Arabic idioms, Qur'anic verses and resonances, French colonial vocabulary, and the clipped bureaucratic vocabularies of visas, borders, police reports, and corrupt political officials (e.g., Larbi Amrani, an official in the Ministry of Education in Rabat). Her prose is sometimes economical at the sentence level, but at the narrative level it is complex: she varies perspective, time, and focalisation to demonstrate how each character's voice is formed by class, geography, linguistic background, gender, colonial legacy, and legal and political status. The result is a style that looks transparent but is actually built around translation between languages on the one hand, and between generations, continents, and ways of seeing on the other.³

Amidst this apparent clarity, Lalami has a remarkably subtle eye for how the distinctive linguistic register of each narrator varies. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, the migrants' voices alternate between fatalism and sharp irony; their speech shifts from the vernacular rhythms of daily life into moments of lyrical intensity and longing as they fantasise about Europe or remember Morocco. In *The Moor's Account*, she reimagines the sixteenth-century Morisco chronicler in a measured, contemplative English that carries a light ironic edge and a gently archaic rhythm suggestive of early chronicles and oral testimony, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of pastiche. Meanwhile, in *The Other Americans*, Lalami brings the reader into the inner worlds of both second-generation Moroccan-Americans and the residents of a white small town — Mojave in Southern California. The style here becomes more concise and economical, reflecting contemporary characteristics of modern narratives marked by pauses, silences, and the things characters struggle to express.

Sansal's *Harraga* and *An Unfinished Business* deal with many of the same themes Lalami explores, but his language and style push in a different direction — toward excess, digression, and a pronounced stylistic richness. By writing in French, Sansal structures his sentences with many subordinate clauses, ironic comments, and sudden changes in register, a style that echoes Algeria's turbulent history and the instability of postcolonial identities. His narrators tend to approach events indirectly rather than recounting them in a linear way; the narrative is framed as tracking truth rather than conforming to standard plot development. He transitions rapidly in tone, from harsh sarcasm to passages marked by grief or quiet sympathy. Where Lalami relies on a clear multilingual realism that allows structure and focalisation to carry the political weight of the narrative, Sansal adopts a rougher, self-conscious prose style full of repetition, black humour, and looping monologue. For both writers, however, language and style are inseparable from politics. Lalami's subdued polyphony and Sansal's expansive discursive style both enact a form of resistance; they both reveal the challenge and the importance of recounting North African migrant stories within a Western paradigm — a literary tradition that has often spoken for them, misrepresented them, or suppressed their voices.

2. A Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Language and Resistance

Before delving deeper into the analysis of language and style in these novels, it is necessary to reflect upon some aspects of the postcolonial migrant novel and language. To fully grasp the

³ Lalami, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, p. 19.

⁴ In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson (1991), makes a distinction between modernist writing styles in which parody operates through mocking and commenting on those styles. Parody, he states, "found a fertile area in the idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their 'inimitable' styles." Pastiche, on the other hand, "is, like parody, [it operates through] the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language." Thus, while parody mocks or comments on a style by contrasting it with recognisable norms or language standards, pastiche, particularly in the postmodern era, emerges in fragmented cultural sites where no single aesthetic or linguistic norm remains. Hence, instead of functioning like parody — as a critical literary practice — pastiche operates as a "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (pp. 16–17).

complicated nature of postcolonial literature, it is necessary to investigate the plural implications of the term "postcolonial". The "post" of the postcolonial does not simply designate the period after colonisation, but refers, above all, to all the practices of resistance to colonialism, to colonialist ideologies, and to contemporary forms of domination and subjection. This premise manifests clearly in literary writing; the study and dissection of the postcolonial novel is therefore necessary to understand the political, cultural, and linguistic problems posed by European colonisation and its legacy. To understand the postcolonial novel, it is important to read theoretical texts by Saïd, Spivak, Ngũgĩ, Bhabha, and other theorists and critics, as well as to analyse English- and French-speaking literary works from Africa and the Caribbean. This requires a focus on the dual goal of revisiting the literary canon through the lens of power relations between individuals, languages, and cultures, as well as highlighting the stylistic and thematic characteristics of novels written by authors from former Western colonies or overseas territories — to investigate their relation to the English or French language, exclusion and inclusion, in-betweenness, national allegories, the voice of subordinates, resistance, the dialectic of master and slave, and the rewriting of history.

This leads us to examine the postcolonial novel discourse, which first rose up against the norms resulting from colonial and colonialist discourse. Stated in general terms, postcolonial discourse stands in stark opposition to all conveyed imperialistic values, whether political, economic, social, cultural, linguistic, or religious. George Lamming assumes, reasonably enough, that more than three-quarters of the modern world has undergone the direct and profound influence of colonialism and imperialism; he maintains, within the same frame, that "processes of artistic and literary decolonisation have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses." Thus, one may assert that colonial discourse is an action and postcolonial discourse is a reaction; they inform and challenge one another, with an obvious attempt on the part of postcolonial discourse to do justice to the colonised subject.⁵

In Lamming's view, there are two outstanding stages suggested for challenging the colonial mindset through literature: first, the dismantling, and second, the appropriation of norms, which seem to correspond to two different attitudes. However, it is obvious that one cannot disregard the impact of colonialism, and that the act of recapturing a discourse in order to make a counter-discourse of it cannot be accompanied by a tabula rasa of colonialism in most — probably even all — cases. To dismantle the colonial mainstream thought, it is necessary to tear it apart through deconstruction as an absolute step in order to understand it first, and then prepare it for reconstruction and rethinking. To appropriate colonial norms is to take them into one's possession and use them according to one's lifestyle and purposes. Both strategies imply a vehement postcolonial movement towards reclaiming one's distorted cultures and abused rights.

Dismantling and appropriation are always most successful when done within and through linguistic means. Language is a battleground for postcolonial discourse because it constitutes the vast majority of colonial discourse. The governing empire's command over language — whether by establishing its language as a supreme method of communication, a kind of lingua franca, or by eradicating native languages by labelling them as minor and impure — remains the most powerful form of cultural control. Similarly, a quasi-epistolary exchange using literary language is sufficient to deconstruct and repurpose colonial rhetoric. In other words, there are numerous responses to the dominance of the colonial language; nonetheless, the two most visible and successful in the decolonisation process are rejection and subversion, which overlap greatly with dismantling and appropriation.⁶

⁵ Tiffin, Helen. (1987) 2011. "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse" [Kunapipi, 9 (3), 1987], in Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen (Eds). p. 17.

⁶ Spurr (1993), argues that appropriation "describe the ways in which postcolonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and

Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* is an excellent example of a postcolonial writer determined to retrieve the forgotten and neglected Mustafa from the prevailing colonial narrative and give him a voice through the use of a foreign language — one of the most prevalent imperial languages. By writing in English, Lalami not only reaches a larger audience but also challenges the colonial legacy that aimed to silence and obliterate voices like Mustafa's. Such a linguistic choice makes a powerful statement, as it transforms the oppressor's language into a tool for freedom and historical reclamation. Thus, recounting Mustafa's story in English becomes a form of resistance to historical narratives that have been controlled and disseminated by colonial powers. The author's use of English bridges the gap between the past and the present, making Mustafa's experiences and thoughts relevant to current readers who would otherwise never have encountered his narrative. This intentional use of language reflects postcolonial voices' adaptability and resilience as they navigate and repurpose the tools of their past oppression to establish their identities and histories. By giving Mustafa a voice in English, Lalami not only challenges the supremacy of colonial rhetoric but also enables readers to engage with the diverse aspects of postcolonial identity and history. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's character Caliban scolds Prospero. Though Prospero's intention was to 'civilise' and control Caliban by teaching him his language, this very form of linguistic imposition becomes a tool for Caliban's resistance and rebellion against his master's domination. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak writes: "Caliban — enslaved, robbed of his island, and taught the language by Prospero — rebukes him thus: 'you taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse.'" In this manner, Caliban subverts the language that was designed for dominance by using it to enunciate his curse and express his rage and sense of betrayal. This episode brings into focus the complexities constitutive of power structures, identities, and languages, particularly in colonial and postcolonial discourses.⁷

Therefore, one should not be taken aback if the postcolonial novel is dominated by a deconstructing discourse that aims at questioning the elements underpinning colonial thought. There is likely an ongoing operation in the reading of a postcolonial novel, a resilient move against colonial prejudice and mindset. In Helen Tiffin's words, the decolonising discourse of the postcolonial novel is a "process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them." While reading and examining postcolonial novels, one will certainly encounter a struggle over values, culture, religion, and destiny; therefore, the postcolonial novel should act as a true figurative example of the existential war between Western discourses and the reaction of the colonised. Since it is not possible to create or recreate national or regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise, it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within — and between — two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world.⁸⁹

argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities. This process is sometimes used to describe the strategy by which the dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys and invades (28)". Quoted in Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2013). *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge, p. 19. Ashcroft et al. maintain that "postcolonial theory focuses instead on an exploration of the ways in which the dominated or colonized culture can use the tools of the dominant discourse [particularly language] to resist its political or cultural control" (p. 19).

⁷ William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, (I.ii.366–368) quoted in Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press. p. 118.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 17–18.

⁹ Tiffin, Helen. (1987) 2011. "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse" [Kunapipi, 9 (3), 1987)], in Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen (Eds). p. 17.

While there were many ways to challenge colonial norms, as Edward Said shows in *Culture and Imperialism*, one may generalise that the inside-out linguistic movement of subversion through literature is the most successful instrument to do so. Everyone remembers, for example, the various cultural and literary movements born from the concept of Négritude pioneered by Aimé Césaire; Césaire is the icon of subverting colonial myths through literature, most notably his French version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where he turned the white myths of superiority upside down, reclaiming rights for Africans.

Physical power is not usually the most majestic means of defending people's abused rights and occupied lands; however, it is a primary means of laying the groundwork for other more peaceful, yet astonishingly powerful, tactics of defence and resistance. At the forefront of these peaceful means, literature and art are among the most efficient tools. Physical conflicts are not limited to specific military battlegrounds, as they may appear to be; immediately after launching the first assault, their echo reaches the farthest area, signalling the start of territorial disputes, political conflicts, and cultural clashes. In such moments, literary writings serve as an impassable barrier to the enemy's further development; they inspire bravery in compatriots, teach the oppressed what to do and what to leave undone, and demonstrate defensive and resistance tactics. Novels have numerous advantages in times of conflict, particularly during the postcolonial period.

Postcolonial novels are samples of successful experiences of fighting cultural and political hegemony, providing the oppressed with the possibility of imagining and drawing their cultural future and, therefore, fighting for their autonomy and prosperity. The postcolonial novel is a true example of the art of cultural resistance. Written with a critical and historical cadence, including rhetorical techniques, postcolonial novels interrogate any colonial assumptions that seem to advance historically false interpretations of foreign lifestyles. Stated otherwise, possessing a revolutionary character, postcolonial literature — mainly novels — is written actively to resist the oppressive structures of power and dominance.¹⁰

This would be to suppose, with considerable conviction, that the postcolonial novel, alongside its linguistic specificities, is a battleground for cultural and political resistance. In most cases, it shows obvious alignment with ill-treated peoples who use works of art as a devastating weapon against colonial claims and traumas. This is not to neglect or ignore the fact that the postcolonial novel, in some cases, serves as a real and severe critique of ex-colonised and postcolonial regimes, as is true with Boualem Sansal's works. He continuously issues socioeconomic and political critiques of the Algerian regime, as is the case with many other postcolonial writers. What makes novels a fierce battleground for cultural and political resistance are the flexibility of language, which allows authors to manipulate their plots freely, and the similarity of cultural disputes between nations, which allows the adoption of remote examples of cultural resistance. These elements allow several tactics for dismantling the dominant culture and reconstructing the domestic one. The cultural beliefs of the author prepare a kind of landscape for intellectual confrontation, through which literature becomes an untameable milieu of cultural clash. All this, after all, is a direct corollary of the fear of cultural and political hegemony, maintained by the natural human impulse to live independently.

Postcolonial critics, and certainly postcolonial writers, were therefore implicitly or explicitly potential co-workers and collaborators in movements of cultural and political resistance. Literature and criticism could work inside the academy with similarly combative effects to protests and marches without.¹¹

With these characteristics, postcolonial writers surpass what is called purely artistic work, and they do all that is possible to correct the concrete disfigured reality. It is the moment when the question arises of whether the author can write differently from how they understand their

¹⁰ Boehmer, Elleke (2018). *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st Century Critical Readings*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press. p. 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

situation, or construct their work differently from how they are compelled to perceive it. It is the moment where the writer must turn colonial conceptions upside down, starting from the dominant illegitimate system and the imposed undesirable cultural representations. Without escaping the siege of traditional poetics and without showing great enthusiasm for the people's cultural cause — which may happen to be under assault — the postcolonial writer will not be able to reclaim people's abused cultural and political rights.

Here, writing ethics are fierce because they intend to devastate the dominant culture with whatever strategy available and reconstruct it through rethinking, after retrieving the domestic culture; these ethics are temporary, and they are the outcome of the current situation. In times of cultural struggle, it is absurd to speak of romantic literary ethics that advocate for the aesthetics of art for art's sake.

In most colonies, this questioning of the ethics of writing first affected the use of the English language, with some writers refusing to write in English, preferring to call it "the language of the Master." Local languages — for example, Kikuyu, as was the case with the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o — were used as an alternative. In the same spirit, other writers have chosen to continue to express themselves in English but integrating other cultural and linguistic elements, as is the case with the poetry of E. Kamau Brathwaite in the West Indies, which is based on what the author calls "Nation Language." It is assumed, logically, that languages long submerged by the dominance of English should be able to emerge again in postcolonial discourse, which corresponds to the concept of relexification in Africa. This is a question of reusing the lexis and the lexicon of African languages, that is to say, of using local terms and linguistic structures specific to African languages.¹²

In the West Indies, this is also reflected, for example, in the introduction of Creole terms, truncated English syntax, or local pronunciations restored by a particular spelling — in a word, of a whole recognisable local dialect, as does, for example, Sam Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners*. Christian Mair's article, "Naipaul's Miguel Street and Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* — Two Approaches to the Use of Caribbean Creole in Fiction," analyses this point. Others, like Naipaul in his early social comedies, even include what looks like typically local text inlays, like Trinidadian calypso snippets, found in nearly half of the short stories in Miguel Street.¹³

One of the other means of questioning the European ethics and norms introduced by colonialism has undoubtedly also been the development of another vision — which is no longer that of obedience or submission, but that of irony and denunciation of behaviours considered artificial because based on the imitation, even the aping, of the metropolis during colonisation. This is revealed by Arundhati Roy's uncompromising descriptions of the Anglophile Ipe family in *The God of Small Things*, of which the patriarch, an imperial entomologist, offers a good illustration. The same goes for his son Chacko, a former Oxford student. Equally eloquent is the uncompromising description of a university garden party in *In Custody* by Anita Desai.

In the same vein, the concept of "mimicry," studied in detail by Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, shows that there is, in Bhabha's terms, "camouflage" — that is to say, both a desire for resemblance and an introduction of a dissimilarity which renders identification incomplete. However, it is from this gap between the desire for imitation and dissimilarity that repositioning can arise.¹⁴

To be sure, the mimicker might be accused of being the white man's artifice. Yet, as the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has explained at length, the act of doubling the white man's image in effect displaced the representations of

¹² Florence, Demeule (2013). « Normes et discours dans le texte postcolonial anglophone (Caraïbes, Inde) : du contre-discours à l'hybridation, Études de stylistique anglaise », 6. P 169–184.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Boehmer, Elleke (1995). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press. P 172.

authority. While never underestimating the magnitude of the task, we can see here how imitation became a kind of remaking, the creation not of a simple copy but of something subtly but distinctly new. Where colonial writers began to represent themselves in literary forms adopted from Europe, they effectively sidestepped the position of silent object in colonialist representation. Mimickers reflected back to the coloniser a distorted image of his world; they undercut his categories of perception.¹⁵

Far from being only negative, imitation therefore makes it possible to introduce another perspective, the awareness of a distortion that can be perceived as the breeding ground for a new space of creation. This is the full significance of a statement by V. S. Naipaul that has often been misunderstood. When the Trinidadian author affirms, for instance, at the beginning of *The Middle Passage*: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies," he especially deplors the feeling of historical, geographical, and social insignificance that colonialism had transmitted to the inhabitants of the small colonies. The colonial experience of chaos and disorder, denounced by the author, could only be re-ordered by writing, and on condition of being able to get rid of inappropriate colonial structures or models. The hero of the Naipaulian novel ¹⁶*The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh, shows the importance of escaping restrictive imitation, and the urgency of finding new standards of writing that can restructure the experience.

3. Laila Lalami

Relatedly, in her writing style, Lalami successfully uses diverse linguistic elements to depict her characters' complex and varied experiences. Her novels make extensive use of language to depict the cultural and societal conflicts that immigrants experience at different levels. Lalami skilfully moves between languages and dialects — including Arabic, Spanish, French, and the narrative language of English — to illustrate her characters' various roots, conditions, and aspirations. This linguistic variance highlights the individuals' identities and the obstacles they face in their search for a better life. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, for instance, she highlights the fact that the majority of Moroccans enjoy speaking more than one language. Murad speaks Arabic, English, and Spanish. Added to this are the mixed migratory tongues: on the "inflatable boat [there are] — not just Moors, but a motley mix of people from the ex-colonies" with diverse dialects and languages; the "Guinean woman whispers an apology in French." Through this stylistic choice, Lalami effectively conveys the enduring impact of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for identity and survival among marginalised peoples. The table below introduces examples of the linguistic variances used in the three novels:¹⁷¹⁸

Table of Linguistic Variances Used in Lalami's Three Novels

	Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits	The Moor's Account	The Other Americans
Moroccan dialect	<i>Harraga, Baraka, safi, briwat, lalla, mbarek u messud, ghurba, Shamali, Chleuh, hemqa, rabuz, mardi, qaleb, uqbal..., Rifi, hlib bheb rshad, balak, alasalamtek, Lah i-selmek, rghaif, derb, guembri, muezzin, kif</i>	<i>Jellaba, Sidi Muhammad, medina, msid, fqih, souq, Qaisariya of Azemmur, zaatar, Arzilah</i>	<i>Benti, hmara, ya lateef, sfenj, msid, Derb Moulay Cherif, Nor-eini, habibti</i>
Arabic	<i>Hijab, Sabah el-khir, insha'llah, mijmar, harem, Eid, mufti</i>	<i>Shari'a, Antara, Scheherazade, hijama, jehennam</i>	<i>Aladdin, Eid, Fatiha, imam, Surat al-Nas,</i>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Florence, Demeule (2013). « Normes et discours dans le texte postcolonial anglophone (Caraïbes, Inde) : du contre-discours à l'hybridation, *Études de stylistique anglaise* », 6. P 169–184.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

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			<i>zaytun, sukkar, habibet el-omr, Eedik, min fadlik (Iraqi), Keefik, ya sukkar? (Iraqi)</i>
Spanish	<i>Guardia Civil, Rubio, El amigo, Espéreme por la caña de azúcar, Soy sus abogada, el vejo, quieren un te?, ¿Hablan español?</i>	<i>Señor, almuerzo, hermano, padres, agua, por fin, Gracias a Dios, Déjame pasar, hombre! Abejorro, Gordo, El Moro, El Negro, El Tigre, Isso é verdade? Damas y caballeros, Guadalquivir, esclavo, por Dios, Amigos y compañeros</i>	<i>La Prensa, papá, yo me voy, me fui, me iba, me iría, me ire, El protocolo</i>
French	<i>Enfant gatée, papa, Café La Liberté</i>	—	<i>A la carte menu, Beaux Arts, comme il faut</i>

In fact, language and dialect shifts are a key component in almost every single work of postcolonial migrant literature, mainly those written in foreign languages, be it French, English, or Spanish. This is very true for Lalami and Sansal. They really reflect the fluidity of the migrant experience in their works. Characters commonly switch between their home languages and the languages of their new countries, demonstrating their struggles to adapt and communicate in their new environment. Murad, the protagonist who speaks Arabic, French, and English, frequently code-switches depending on the situation. The same is true for Nora, her parents Driss and Maryam, and her sister Salma in *The Other Americans*. Also, in *The Moor's Account*, Mustafa switches into Arabic when he utters a verse from the Qur'an. This linguistic flexibility represents the overall theme of adaptation and survival in the face of cultural displacement. The language shifts also depict the protagonists' liminal identities, caught between their previous lives and the uncertain future they want.

In *The Moor's Account*, the protagonist Mustafa frequently code-switches between Moroccan Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese — a language he had learned in Azemmur during the Portuguese occupation of his Moroccan city. This reflects his complex identity, which is shaped by his diverse cultural experiences in Morocco, Spain, La Florida (the New World), and New Spain (Mexico). Mustafa's ability to switch between several languages represents his varied talents and the integration of various cultural influences in his life. His recitations of Qur'anic verses in several critical situations throughout the narrative constitute a major instance of language shifting. He reads from *Ayat al-Kursi*: "His throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth and He feeleth—." The same is done by Faten when "Rahal bangs the motor with his hand. Faten recites a verse from the second sura of the Qur'an: 'God, there is no God but Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him—.'" Also, on missing her husband Driss, Maryam seeks refuge in the Qur'an: "the Surat Al-Imran teaches us that every soul shall have a taste of death, and the life of this world is only the comfort of deception."¹⁹²⁰²¹

Surely, the reciting of the Qur'an serves both as spiritual comfort and solace for Mustafa, Faten, and Maryam, and allows them to confront unsettling and frequently antagonistic social conditions in disorienting environments. This practice constitutes one of the most common ways through which migrants seek to preserve their faith and heritage. The recitation of Qur'anic verses in Arabic, a sacred and familiar language, stands in stark contrast to the foreign tongues they use on a daily basis, emphasising the internal conflict between their identities as a Moor or immigrants and the external pressures to assimilate into dominant cultures. This language flexibility emphasises the themes of relocation, survival, and maintaining one's roots in the face of cultural and linguistic dominance. Lalami uses her narrators' and characters' code-switching to highlight the protagonists' tenacity and the multiple dimensions of the

¹⁹ Lalami, *The Other Americans*, p. 268.

²⁰ Lalami, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, p. 7.

²¹ Lalami, *The Moor's Account*, p. 156.

migrant experience, in which language becomes a critical instrument for both communication and cultural preservation.

As a cultural trait, Moroccans have long celebrated and taken pride in their love of acquiring and learning multiple languages. This stems primarily from the country's geostrategic location connecting the African and European continents, as well as the historical trade routes that passed through Morocco by both land and sea. Added to this is the colonial era in which Moroccans were coerced to deal and communicate with the coloniser in his European tongue. Mustafa and his people experienced these cultural and linguistic conditions while in Azemmur, and he endured them alone after being transported as a slave to the land of the Christians. After reaching La Florida, he expresses his deep curiosity and affinity for learning foreign tongues, narrating, "My upbringing in a trading town like Azemmur had instilled in me a love of language and, if I may be forgiven for this moment of immodesty, a certain ease with it. So I was curious about the Indians' tongue." Mustafa's statement discloses the role of language as not only a tool for survival but also as a bridge between the varied cultures of the world.²²

The crucial role of language in preserving personal and cultural identity is abundantly referred to in *The Moor's Account*. Throughout Mustafa's narrative, his ability to navigate different languages alludes not only to his adaptability and endurance under colonialist rules but also to his struggles to maintain his identity and self in foreign and oppressive environments. Being a slave costs him the loss of his freedom, name, language, history, culture, and self. He deplores this loss by saying, "When I fell into slavery, I was forced to give up not just my freedom, but also the name that my mother and father had chosen for me. A name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world." This quote painfully depicts the consequences of being severed from one's language and the traditions of one's ancestors, as well as from the community and history that shaped him. Mustafa's words expose the deep connection between language, identity, and power. His aspirations as a slave remain always high; he aspires to regain his linguistic, cultural, and physical freedom. He dreams that his master Dorantes may one day declare him free and that he "would once again speak the language of [his] forefathers and find comfort in the traditions [he] had been forced to cast aside. [He] would live out the rest of [his] days among [his] people."²³²⁴

The novel further foregrounds the politics of language when Lalami addresses the function of enslaved people as pathfinders and interpreters, compelled to support the Narváez expedition in their colonialist enterprise. Traditionally, the coloniser has always relied on the linguistic abilities of the enslaved and indigenous peoples to navigate foreign territories and establish control. Mustafa narrates, "We may not have maps, Señor Narváez replied pleasantly, but we have the four Indians. The padres will teach them our language, so that they can serve as guides and translators." Language, in this context, becomes an efficient instrument of colonial and imperial hegemony, used to extract information, communicate with native populations, and expand the imperialist project. The act of teaching the enslaved and indigenous peoples the coloniser's language helps in using them as intermediaries while simultaneously asserting cultural and linguistic superiority. With translators like Mustafa positioned in a precarious liminal space between the oppressor and the oppressed, the quote illustrates the larger subject of how linguistic power relations function in colonial settings.²⁵

The last example of linguistic exploitation for colonialist purposes to be mentioned here is that of the strategy of renaming colonised spaces. Renaming colonial spaces has been a common practice since antiquity and is unlikely to fade in the future. This act is more psychological and ideological than it is historical, cultural, and economic. It asserts dominance

²² Lalami, *The Moor's Account*, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 14.

²⁴ *The Moor's Account*, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16.

and reshapes the identity of colonised lands in the image of the colonisers. Mustafa explains, "... the Spaniards had declared their dominion over La Florida. So they gave new names to everything around them, as though they were the All-Knowing God in the Garden of Eden." Lalami is thus comparing the Spaniards' practice of renaming the colonised land to the biblical story of God naming all things in the Garden of Eden. In addition to the various colonial ideological strategies used by the "white man" to dominate other races and lands — such as the "civilising mission," the "white man's burden," and many other Orientalist approaches — the Spaniards here also assume divine-like authority, positioning themselves as creators and rulers over the New World. As a first step, they erased the indigenous names and identity tied to the land. This ideology is deeply symbolic of their claim to power and control, in which language becomes an instrument of domination.²⁶

4. Boualem Sansal

In a somewhat different manner, Sansal adopts a denser and more satirical prose style inspired by political critique and existential concern. In *Harraga* and *An Unfinished Business*, the author conceives of language not as a simple neutral communicative tool, but rather as a site of historical burden, where colonial legacies, nationalist agendas, religious extremism, and migrant dislocation intersect. Even after the official end of colonial rule, language still plays one of its most ideological roles: shaping those who belong, those who have the right to speak legitimately and represent the "subaltern," and those who are condemned to silence and exclusion. In such a linguistic game, French, Arabic, Berber, and hybrid vernaculars interact and coexist uneasily due to colonial and postcolonial dominant linguistic systems that have sought and continue to assimilate non-European languages. Sansal's use of such a variety of linguistic registers, each carrying its political, moral, and emotional weight, alludes to the fact that his characters in both novels inhabit a linguistic space fractured by Arabisation policies, bureaucratic violence, religious absolutism, and diasporic hybridity. All these elements contribute to perceiving and framing language itself as a condition of exile.

In light of this, instead of welcoming multilingualism as cosmopolitan enrichment, Sansal introduces it as disorienting, unsettling, and disempowering for postcolonial subjects. His narrators in both novels — Lamia, Rachel, and Malrich — have trouble reading Arabic, their supposedly mother tongue. Lamia makes reference to the fact that some characters find it difficult to read manuals, street signs, official documents, family histories, even each other, mainly after independence. Language comes to serve as a marker of postcolonial failure: people are surrounded by words and worlds that exclude them, demean them, stigmatise them, or deceive them. With irony, anecdote, and reflective critique, Sansal reveals that post-independence Algeria as well as migrant France reproduce systems of domination through language. He opens *Harraga* with an apparently trivial scene — reading instruction manuals — which he manages to turn into an act of meditation on linguistic alienation in postcolonial Algeria. He writes, "Finding your own language in an instruction booklet is a riddle in itself, so I would read the first page that came to hand, Chinese, Korean, Hindu, Russian, Turkish, Greek. I would stare and stare at the text. It's so complicated. It seems impossible that people can speak and understand these languages." This passage draws attention to a significant postcolonial paradox in which language takes a considerable part of postcolonial subjects, yet meaning remains elusive and inaccessible. Lamia is confused by the riddle-like foreign scripts, suggesting a loss of faith in communication itself. Language is perceived as a tool that no longer guarantees understanding but rather deepens and exacerbates miscommunication.²⁷

Colonial languages have always prompted linguistic, cultural, and identity controversies for postcolonial nations. In *Harraga*, French as an ex-colonial language provokes irritation

²⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

²⁷ Sansal, *Harraga*, p. 18.

rather than familiarity. It is not registered as a reassuring medium of communication but as an intrusive reminder of domination and cultural distortion. The narrator explains, "I avoided the French booklets, churned out by polyglots who learn the language of Molière from fast-food menus. They infuriated me, I felt an irresistible urge to rewrite them before reading them point by point." This statement aligns with the fact that French is neither rejected nor fully embraced; it is contested. Lamia's felt desire to "rewrite" the manuals emphasises a deep struggle over the ownership of language — an act of linguistic ambivalence toward the colonial language. French, in this case, is presented as an instrumentalised and impoverished language, mirroring the way postcolonial subjects inherit a linguistically and symbolically emptied tongue. In a nutshell, French is reduced to a functional global jargon.²⁸

Arabic, the supposedly reclaimed Algerian national language, does not escape Sansal's societal critique. It becomes associated with state oppression rather than cultural identity and belonging. Lamia avoids Arabic for this reason. She says, "I ignored the Arabic, which reminds me of the hateful slew of paperwork that our glorious government uses to manipulate us from January to December all the civic year." In this context, Arabic is presented less as a language of cultural heritage and faith than as an instrument of bureaucratic authority. Accordingly, independence did not set Arabic free; it weaponised it. Sansal therefore undermines nationalist myths by making it clear that Arabisation, in postcolonial Algeria, acted as a source of estrangement, not unity.²⁹

The author draws attention to one of the most crucial topics in postcolonial theory: whether to preserve the language of the ex-coloniser or to restore the national and Arabic language as a symbol of cultural and political sovereignty. This dilemma has been widely discussed by many postcolonial theorists and writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Kateb Yacine, and others. Sansal places this debate within the daily confusion and anxiety of his characters; he does not settle this conflict but makes it more visible. For him, the Arabisation reform of the 1970s does not foster empowerment but instead generates panic and humiliation among ordinary citizens. Lamia explains, "when the seismic shift came in 1976, when every street sign, every road sign was replaced in the space of a single night, ... [Moussa, the postman, who cannot read Arabic] did his best to Arabise in the few short hours allotted, but the edict caught him off guard, as it did all of us." This sudden linguistic transformation displays the coercive nature and violence of top-down language policy, where the familiar is abruptly transformed into something foreign almost overnight.³⁰

The policy of Arabisation that developed after independence was conceived as a means of cultural decolonisation and national integration, but it actually produced new kinds of exclusion, disorientation, and symbolic violence. Through the forceful imposition of Arabic as a signifier of legitimacy — without ensuring social, educational, or affective continuities — language became appropriated by the state not as an instrument of emancipation but of control. Moussa's secret illiteracy testifies to this fact by offering a fictional perspective on the outcome of linguistic sovereignty in postcolonial Algeria. The narrator tells us how Moussa lied to his boss: "he lied to his boss, who was also of the old school; between the two of them they could barely decipher half the new Arabic script; Moussa admitted as much one day when I caught him red-handed pleading with some scruffy schoolboy to translate an address for him." Such a reversal of roles — the fact that an elder is made to depend on a child for reading — suggests a collapse and failure of authority. As an emblem of national symbolism, Arabic becomes exclusionary rather than inclusive. The postman feels "as though he is in some foreign land, his guardian angel replaced by a fearsome ³¹*djinn*, and, terrified of being hunted down for treason, he pushes envelopes into the nearest letterboxes, all the while doing his best to look

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 86.

³¹ Ibid.

like he knows what he's doing. ... I hope that the old codger will escape the hornets' nest alive." In this instance, illiteracy is punished and criminalised, and language is introduced as proof of loyalty; citizens are perceived as suspects if they lack this medium of affiliation.³²

This sociolinguistic malfunctioning — a rapid and state-imposed process of Arabisation — affected even the educated elite, who were linguistically displaced by post-independence language politics. This sudden linguistic shift excluded French-educated groups and deepened the separation between cultural capital and official language use. Tata Houria, a secondary character in *Harraga*, had waited more than thirty years for her missing husband, who had been sent to participate in World War II. She later immigrated to Germany, "a country where disappearing was commonplace in the years after the Apocalypse," to wait for him. Upon her death, the family received a letter written "in pidgin French" from Rosita, a woman who had taken care of her during her last days. Lamia explains:³³

One day, a scrawled letter arrived in the *douar* announcing her death. The school teacher – a different one, a young man freshly graduated from university – was unable to read it and asked around until finally one day he appeared in the tiny village square, brandishing the letter to announce the results of his research: the letter, dated 22 June 1966 and written in pidgin French, had come from the far side of the world and was signed simply Rosita.³⁴

This irony about the school teacher who cannot read Arabic is really emblematic. It reveals one of the most profound direct impacts of colonialism on colonised subjects: education no longer guarantees literacy but adds complexity and exclusion. Linguistic authority collapses in the eyes of its users and practitioners, and the letter's pidgin French emphasises a condition of linguistic fragmentation rather than unity. Through this narrative, the author suggests that pidgin French, a hybrid unofficial language, often articulates truth more convincingly than the state-sanctioned native language. Even through French, traces of historical violence manifest in everyday speech; it is never a neutral medium of communication but a language charged with frustration, resentment, and historical memory. The narrator emphasises this when talking about herself: "Well then, it's French, I only speak it when I'm angry." French is represented as a language of rage and repression; it is never neutral.³⁵

On the other hand, French people such as Bluebeard, a character in the novel, "He speaks Algerian too, but with an accent," Chérifa told Lamia after visiting him in his house. Then, Lamia notes, "That's the *pied-noir* accent, you'd never mistake it for an English accent." Through its phonetic features, the ³⁶*pied-noir* accent reproduces colonial hierarchies. This is an example of how language retains memory and how colonialism survives in linguistic practices that continue to structure authority and belonging.

In another instance, Lamia would say, "I spent the day in the attic, *el groni*, Papa called it – in his Kabyle accent, he spoke Arabic as if it were French and vice versa. This twofold solecism is the dialect we call *pataouëte*³⁷." Sansal conceives of linguistic hybridity as both error and inheritance. The "twofold solecism" becomes a metaphor for postcolonial identity itself — seen as an impure formulation of language, mocked for its lack of linguistic form, yet remaining an authentic way through which people express themselves freely.

In *An Unfinished Business*, Sansal introduces an Algerian family that seems to lack a native language unifying even the small family of Rachel, Malrich, and their parents. It is a family

³² Ibid, p. 87.

³³ Ibid, p. 182.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 109.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 126.

without language. Rachel and Malrich's migration to France has a great impact on their family; migration fractures migrants' families linguistically as well as geographically:

I never saw my father again. I never went back to Algeria and he never came to France. He didn't want us going back to the bled, he'd say: 'Some day, maybe, we'll see . . .' Maman came three times for a fortnight and spent the whole time crying. It's fucked up, we couldn't even understand each other. Maman only spoke Berber and we'd be babbling away in whatever random Arabic we picked up on the estate and bits of German cobbled together.³⁸

Sansal depicts language as a site of rupture rather than connection and integration; it serves more in deepening the feelings of exile and familial disintegration in postcolonial Algeria. The use of these linguistic fragments — Berber, improvised Arabic, and broken German — is not an enrichment in the form of hybridity; instead it manifests as a sign of communicative incompetence and emotional distance. The language here is insufficient and broken, unable to span the generational, geographical, or historical gaps. The family's linguistic impasse reflects their more general diasporic alienation from Algeria and each other, as if migration is not only about moving the body but also about fracturing common symbolic orders. Sansal therefore depicts language as a vessel carrying the injuries of colonial history, migration, and forced movement: rather than operating as a secure medium of belonging, it serves to recall dislocation, division, and the unattainability of return to an original sense of wholeness.

Most of the time, North African migrant fiction finds itself submerged in endless linguistic fragmentation and multilingual babbling instead of meaningful dialogue. When Rachel's mother travelled to France to see her migrant sons, who had departed years before, she could not communicate with them. Malrich explains:

Maman never spoke much German and the best we could do was string together what little we remembered, so the three of us would just sit round smiling, saying, *Ja, ja, gut, labesse, azul, Ça va?, genau, cool, et toi?* Rachel went back once, when he came to take me back to France. Papa never left the village. It's weird, but family stuff is always weird, there's so much you don't know, you don't think about that. After school, where he studied German out of family loyalty and English because he had to, Rachel went to the Institute of Engineering in Nantes.³⁹

This passage brings attention to linguistic rupture and discontinuity, whereby multilingualism does not necessarily connote linguistic fluency or comprehension but instead reveals the disintegration of intergenerational bonds as well as cultural continuity. The string of unconnected words, "*Ja, ja, gut, labesse, azul, Ça va?, genau, cool, et toi?*," forms a verbal collage and reflects the erosion of dialogue; communication is reduced to courteous formulas that signify coexistence and respect rather than genuine communication. Language in this case does not function as a bridge but as a surface that conceals emotional estrangement, historical disjunction, and exile. That the family members cannot speak the same tongue is a metaphor for the wider postcolonial experience, in which inherited languages no longer correspond to lived realities. Rachel's studying German "out of family loyalty" and English "because he had to" suggests how language becomes not affective or elective, but pragmatic and compulsory — an emphasis which contributes to Sansal's challenge of a world where identity is jammed together under pressure and coercion rather than growing organically.

Linguistic acquisition — of the former coloniser's language or of that of the host society — is frequently portrayed as a central condition for integration; however, the capacity to speak French (or any other received language) does not alone ensure that North African migrants are fully assimilated into social, cultural, or psychological realms. Rachel's mastery of French offered him no sense of security. Malrich states, "His French [Rachel's] isn't like mine. The

³⁸ Sansal, *An Unfinished Business*, p. 9.

³⁹ Sansal, *An Unfinished Business*, pp. 9–10.

dictionary wasn't much help, every time I looked something up it just referred me to something else. French is a real minefield, every word is a whole history linked to every other." Language has always carried historical guilt, a matter that makes of its appropriation an ever-present reminder of the hierarchical relationship between a set of binarisms such as coloniser/colonised, white/black, native/migrant, and so on.⁴⁰

For North African migrant fiction, language has always been a site of struggle, negotiation, and power relations. *An Unfinished Business* furnishes this scene by presenting language as a battleground where racism, belonging, and cultural authority intersect to formulate the different parameters that condition communication between natives and non-natives on the one hand, and between non-natives themselves on the other. In this context, language may act as a barometer that indexes, registers, and reveals social, cultural, and political relations within the host country, France. Sansal captures this through the character of Rachel, the narrator:

One day she said to me [Ophiélie], 'You're all the same, you half-breeds, it's all six of one and half a dozen of the other, you have no idea what you want really.' I said, 'You can tell your mother from me that six of one and half a dozen of the other are not the same thing, even though that's what the expression is supposed to mean.' Ophiélie sulked for a whole week because I corrected her, and her mother phoned me and screamed that she wasn't about to take French lessons from a foreigner. I didn't know what she was talking about, but I said, 'It's all relative. A foreigner is only foreign to a foreigner. In the absolute he is just a person and there's no law that says he can't read Molière and Maupassant.'⁴¹

Ophiélie's statement reduces difference into sameness by using a racialised cliché, refusing to give the narrator a stable, distinct identity; contrarily, her misuse of a French idiom suggests instability and implies that she is false in claiming linguistic authority at all. Only when the narrator corrects the expression does he momentarily reverse the balance of power, proving that mastery of the ex-colonial language is not exclusively reserved for those who posit cultural or national superiority. The mother's objection to "take French lessons from a foreigner" clearly demonstrates how language is viewed as proprietary and exclusionary rather than social and cultural. The narrator's insistence that "a foreigner is only foreign to a foreigner" confronts this viewpoint with an alternative conception of identity as relational rather than fixed, and affirms the postcolonial subject's rightful appropriation and access to canonical French culture.

5. Conclusion

Overall, both Lalami and Sansal present language as a conflictual and discursive site of meaning, identity, power, and postcolonial negotiation, contestation, and ambivalence, yet with varying degrees and different manners. Lalami treats language as a means of recovering identity and reclaiming agency; it is a means through which North African migrants negotiate their belonging, whether in host countries or when reflecting upon their migrant status. Her characters relentlessly move between Arabic, French, English, Spanish, and most often between their cultural memories, as a means of resisting erasure and giving voice to hybrid identities. Sansal, on the other hand, represents language as fractured, unstable, and fraught with political implications. In *Harraga* and *An Unfinished Business*, multilingualism often reveals alienation, failed integration, ideological manipulation, and the unresolved inheritance of modern history from colonialism to post-colonialism. Therefore, Lalami uses language to reclaim voiceless subjectivities; she focuses on multilingual traces to humanise the migrant experience, restore memory, and reclaim narrative authority. While Sansal uses language to

⁴⁰ *An Unfinished Business*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 80.

diagnose disorder, he aims at laying bare social disintegration, political corruption, religious extremism, and identity crisis, mainly in post-independence Algeria.

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⁴² Lalami, Laila (2008). *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. Fez: Moroccan Cultural Studies Center.