

Identity Struggles and Cultural Hybridity in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014)

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Abstract

This scholarly inquiry engages with the thematic underpinnings of identity struggles and cultural hybridity within the context of Laila Lalami's seminal work, *The Moor's Account* (2014). Situated within the paradigm of postcolonial literature, the investigation scrutinizes the narrative against the historical tableau, probing the intricate dynamics of identity negotiation and the nuanced interplay of diverse cultural forces. Through a meticulous analysis of the protagonist's trajectory, the study elucidates the complex processes through which identity is formulated, contested, and ultimately harmonized within the framework of cultural hybridity. Lalami's narrative emerges as a sophisticated tapestry interweaving personal and historical dimensions, compelling readers to grapple with the intricate threads of identity construction amidst colonial encounters. This examination contributes substantively to the broader discourse on postcolonial literature, offering insights into the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity struggles and cultural hybridity as portrayed in Lalami's magnum opus.

Keywords: Identity Struggles; Cultural Hybridity; Postcolonial Literature; Colonial Encounters

Introduction

Within the intricate tapestry of postcolonial literature, the exploration of identity struggles and cultural hybridity emerges as a profound and multi-layered discourse, unravelling the complex dynamics of individual and collective identities in the aftermath of historical colonial encounters. This paper directs its scholarly gaze toward the literary oeuvre of Laila Lalami, with a specific focus on her magnum opus, *The Moor's Account*. Lalami's narrative not only weaves a captivating tale set against the backdrop of historical events but also provides a fertile ground for the examination of the nuanced interplay between personal identity negotiation and the broader cultural forces at play [1]. The narrative unfolds within the historical tapestry of colonialism, where the protagonist's journey becomes a microcosm for the intricate processes of identity formation, contestation, and reconciliation. Lalami's meticulous storytelling invites readers to traverse the labyrinthine landscape of the protagonist's experiences, shedding light on the various facets of identity that emerge in the crucible of colonial histories [2]. The article positions itself

within the broader framework of postcolonial literature, recognizing narratives as both mirrors and windows-reflecting the intricacies of personal identity while offering glimpses into the collective struggles of communities navigating the complexities of cultural hybridity. At the heart of this scholarly inquiry is a meticulous analysis of the protagonist's trajectory, a character whose narrative arc becomes emblematic of broader historical and cultural forces. The protagonist's struggles and triumphs serve as a compelling lens through which the paper seeks to unravel the complexities of identity negotiation. Furthermore, this exploration extends beyond the individual, encapsulating the collective experiences of communities grappling with the transformative forces of colonial encounters. Therefore, Lalami's narrative becomes a vehicle for storytelling and a profound examination of the evolving nature of identity in the wake of colonialism [3].

The thematic exploration undertaken in this article transcends the boundaries of literary analysis to contribute substantively to the broader academic discourse surrounding postcolonial

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Received date: 10 Sep 2023; **Accepted date:** 15 Sep 2023; **Published date:** 22 Oct 2023

literature. This paper endeavours to enhance our understanding of the intricate and dynamic nature of identity formation by dissecting the thematic threads of identity struggles and cultural hybridity. It aims to situate Lalami's work within the larger tapestry of postcolonial literature, drawing connections between the personal and the collective, the historical and the contemporary. Moreover, this paper recognizes the narrative richness and depth of Lalami's work as a fertile ground for exploring the struggles inherent in identity formation and the potential for hybrid identities to emerge and evolve. The term "cultural hybridity" takes centre stage, reflecting the blending and negotiation of diverse cultural elements within the narrative [4]. The article engages with the notion that cultural hybridity is not a passive consequence of colonial encounters but a dynamic process of adaptation and resistance, where individuals and communities navigate the complexities of their cultural heritage while embracing new and evolving identities. In the subsequent sections of this paper, the focus will shift towards a detailed literary analysis, where the protagonist's journey will be scrutinized about the broader thematic underpinnings of identity struggles and cultural hybridity. By engaging with specific passages and narrative elements, we aim to unearth the subtleties and complexities that Lalami employs to depict the intricate dance between personal and collective identity in the aftermath of colonial histories. In essence, this article stands as a testament to the enduring relevance and significance of postcolonial literature in our understanding of identity. Through the lens of Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*, we embark on a journey that transcends the boundaries of time and space, unravelling the intricacies of identity struggles and cultural hybridity that continue to shape and reshape the contours of our collective human experience.

Estebanico's Complex Identity

In *The Moor's Account*, the complexities of identity struggles and cultural hybridity in the context of the early Spanish conquest of the Americas are explored. The character of Estebanico, a North African slave who becomes the first African to explore the Americas, is central to the novel's exploration of these themes. Estebanico's identity is shaped by his experiences as a slave, an African, and a Muslim, resulting in a complex identity that is a significant theme in the novel. Through a critical analysis of Estebanico's experiences, this paper examines the ways in which cultural identity is influenced by power dynamics and historical context, and how marginalized individuals resist cultural erasure and assert their own identities. Estebanico's identity as a slave is one of the

most significant aspects of his character in the novel. His experiences as a slave not only shape his personality but also determine his position in society. As a slave, Estebanico is treated as property and used for labor, making him vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse [5]. However, he also holds power over his Spanish captors because of his knowledge of the land and languages, highlighting the complex and shifting relationships between colonizer and colonized. Furthermore, Estebanico's experiences as a slave leave him with emotional scars, such as a sense of isolation and a deep mistrust of his Spanish captors. These emotional scars are a significant aspect of his identity as a slave, highlighting the emotional toll of slavery on marginalized individuals in colonial contexts.

Estebanico's identity as a slave intersects with other themes in the novel, such as cultural hybridity and power dynamics. Estebanico's experiences as a slave highlight the ways in which power dynamics shape cultural identity in colonial contexts. His Spanish captors attempt to erase his African heritage and Muslim faith, forcing him to adopt their language, religion, and customs. This erasure of his cultural identity is a common tactic used by colonizers to assert their power over colonized peoples, as it allows them to control the cultural and social norms of the colonized society. However, Estebanico's resistance to assimilation also underscores the potential for cross-cultural exchange and hybridity in colonial contexts. Despite the pressures to conform, Estebanico maintains his own cultural practices and beliefs, such as his adherence to Islam and his use of Arabic language. In doing so, he asserts his own cultural identity and resists the erasure of his African heritage. Estebanico's knowledge of multiple languages and cultures allows him to navigate different cultural contexts and engage in cross-cultural exchanges with indigenous peoples and other slaves [6]. This cross-cultural exchange highlights the potential for hybridity and cultural innovation in practices. Furthermore, this cross-cultural exchange can serve as a form of resistance to cultural erasure and domination, as individuals are able to maintain and assert their own cultural identities in the face of colonial pressures to assimilate. Estebanico's experience as a slave in the novel demonstrates the potential for cross-cultural exchange, resistance, and hybridity in colonial contexts, highlighting the nuanced and complex nature of cultural identity in these contexts [7]. Through his experiences, we see the potential for both cultural erasure and hybridity in colonial contexts, and the ways in which individuals are able to assert their own cultural identities and resist colonial domination.

Estebanico's African roots are a crucial part of his identity in *The Moor's Account*, and they serve as a contrast to the New World and his Spanish captors. Born in Azemmour, a city on

the Atlantic coast of Morocco, Estebanico's African heritage influenced his beliefs and perceptions of the world, which were different from those of his Spanish captors. Lalami uses Estebanico's African heritage to create a contrast between his place of birth and the New World, highlighting the complexities of identity struggles in colonial contexts. One example of this contrast is Estebanico's struggle to comprehend the Spanish idea of land ownership. Coming from a society that did not have the same concept, he found it challenging to reconcile it with his own beliefs and perceptions of the world. This contrast underscores the complexities of identity struggles in colonial contexts, as individuals are forced to navigate and reconcile different cultural norms and values. Estebanico's Muslim faith is a significant part of his identity in the novel, and Lalami uses it to highlight the brutal European colonization of America and the oppression of the indigenous people. Estebanico's faith is perceived as a threat by the Spanish conquistadors, who refer to him as a 'Moor' or a 'Muslim', highlighting the ways in which his faith is used to marginalize and exclude him from the dominant colonial society [8]. Estebanico's Muslim faith also influences his actions in the novel, as he faces a conflict of interest between his faith and his loyalty to the conquistadors. For example, his decision to help the indigenous people during the expedition is influenced by his Muslim faith, which emphasizes the importance of justice and compassion for all people. This conflict of interest underscores the complexities of identity struggles in colonial contexts, as individuals are forced to navigate and reconcile different cultural norms and values. Estebanico's Muslim faith affects his relationship with the Spanish conquistadors in a number of ways. Firstly, his faith is often perceived as a threat by the Spanish, who view him as an infidel and mistrust him as a result. This mistrust is compounded by his status as a slave, which further marginalizes him within the colonial society. Despite this, Estebanico maintains his faith and beliefs throughout the novel, often putting him at odds with the Spanish conquistadors. For example, his Muslim faith emphasizes the importance of justice and compassion for all people, which leads him to question the violent and exploitative actions of the Spanish. This conflict of interest between his faith and his loyalty to the conquistadors creates tension in their relationship.

Estebanico's Muslim faith also allows him to empathize with the indigenous people and understand how their culture and way of life are being eroded and destroyed by the colonizers. This empathy and understanding further distances him from the Spanish conquistadors and underscores the differences between their respective cultures and beliefs. Overall, Estebanico's Muslim faith affects his relationship with the Spanish

conquistadors by creating a sense of tension and conflict of interest between his faith and his loyalty to the colonizers. It also allows him to empathize with the indigenous people and understand the impacts of colonization on their culture and way of life. Estebanico's Muslim faith is a significant part of his identity in *The Moor's Account*, and Lalami uses it to highlight the brutal European colonization of America and the oppression of the indigenous people. By exploring the ways in which his faith influences his actions and experiences, Lalami is able to provide a nuanced and complex portrayal of the impacts of colonization on individuals and societies.

Cultural Hybridity in the New World

Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity is relevant to the theme of cultural hybridity in *The Moor's Account* [9]. argues that cultural hybridity is not simply the blend of different cultures, but rather a process of negotiation and adaptation that creates something new and transformative. In other words, cultural hybridity is not just the result of the intersection of different cultures, but the process of creating something new that is not fully determined by either culture [8]. This idea is evident in *The Moor's Account*, where the cultural hybridity is portrayed as a transformative and mutually respectful process. Mustafa's interactions with the indigenous peoples of Florida showcase a cultural exchange that is genuinely respectful and transformative. Through these interactions, Mustafa's identity is transformed, as he navigates and reconciles different cultural norms and values. This process of negotiation and adaptation creates something new and unique, which the Moors or the Spanish do not fully determine.

[9], argues that cultural hybridity creates a space of ambiguity and indeterminacy, which challenges dominant cultural norms and values. This finds true expression in the novel, where Mustafa's cultural hybridity challenges the Spanish conquistadors' dominant cultural norms and values. Mustafa's Muslim faith and African heritage are perceived as a threat by the Spanish, who view him as an infidel and mistrust him as a result. However, Mustafa's interactions with the indigenous peoples of Florida challenge these dominant cultural norms and values, creating a space of ambiguity and indeterminacy that subverts the dominant cultural hierarchy.

Mustafa's identity is transformed through cultural hybridity in a number of ways. One example of this transformation is Mustafa's adoption of the indigenous name, "Estebanico". This name is given to him by the indigenous people, and it represents a transformation of his identity from a slave of the Spanish to a respected member of the indigenous community. This name

also represents a fusion of different cultural identities, as “Estebanico” is a combination of the Spanish name “Esteban” and the indigenous suffix “-ico”. This fusion of different cultural identities underscores the transformative potential of cultural hybridity, as individuals are able to negotiate and reconcile different cultural norms and values to create something new and unique.

Another example is evident in how Mustafa's interactions with the indigenous people of Florida challenge his cultural norms and values. He learns about the importance of communal living and sharing resources from the indigenous people, which contrasts with the Spanish's individualistic and hierarchical social structures [10]. This exposure to a different way of life represents a transformative moment for Mustafa, as he begins to question the values and practices of the Spanish and embrace a more communal way of living. Similarly, Mustafa's exposure to new spiritual practices and beliefs through his interactions with the indigenous people also transforms his identity. As a Muslim, Mustafa's faith emphasizes the importance of justice and compassion for all people, which leads him to question the violent and exploitative actions of the Spanish conquistadors. Through his interactions with the indigenous peoples, Mustafa is exposed to different spiritual practices and beliefs, which challenge his own beliefs and broaden his perspective. This transformation underscores the potential for cultural hybridity to foster understanding and cooperation between different cultural groups.

Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the “contact zone” is highly relevant to the study of cultural hybridity, as it provides a framework for understanding the complexities and challenges of cross-cultural exchange and adaptation. Pratt defines the contact zone as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” [11]. This definition highlights the power dynamics and cultural clashes that often characterize cross-cultural interactions. In contact zones, individuals are forced to navigate and reconcile different cultural norms and values, which can be a difficult and transformative process. However, contact zones also offer the potential for cultural hybridity, as individuals are able to create new and unique identities that challenge dominant cultural norms and values.

The novel depicts Mustafa's experiences as he navigates the contact zone between the Spanish conquistadors and the indigenous peoples of Florida. This contact zone is characterized by power imbalances and cultural clashes, as the Spanish attempt to impose their beliefs and practices on the indigenous people. Mustafa, as a Moroccan Muslim slave, is

caught in the middle of this contact zone, forced to navigate and reconcile different cultural norms and values. However, the novel also highlights the potential for cultural hybridity and transformation in contact zones. Through Mustafa's interactions with the indigenous people, we see the creation of a new cultural identity that is not fully determined by any one culture or tradition. This cultural hybridity challenges the dominant cultural norms and values of the Spanish, creating a space of ambiguity and indeterminacy that subverts the dominant cultural hierarchy. In *The Moor's Account*, Laila Lalami presents a complex and nuanced exploration of cultural hybridity in the New World. Through the experiences of Mustafa, who is caught in the contact zone between the Spanish conquistadors and the indigenous peoples of Florida, the novel highlights the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchange and adaptation. Mustafa's interactions with the indigenous peoples of Florida create a space of cultural hybridity, where different cultural norms and values are negotiated and reconciled to create new and unique identities.

The Power of Naming and Reclaiming Identity

In *The Moor's Account*, Mustafa's story serves as a testament to the transformative and empowering nature of reclaiming one's name and identity. Mustafa's experience of being stripped of his identity and name by the Spanish conquerors and his subsequent realization of the importance of his true name and identity as a Moroccan and a Muslim underscore the power of naming and the significance of cultural heritage. As Mustafa notes, “a name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world” [12]. Mustafa's rejection of the nickname “Estebanico” and his insistence on introducing himself as “Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori” reflect his recognition of the cultural significance and agency inherent in reclaiming one's name and identity. For Mustafa, the act of reclaiming his name is a way of reconnecting with his cultural heritage and asserting his agency in the face of colonial oppression. As he reflects, “Losing. Abdelghafour Ben Lahbib, meant losing my ties to all those things [my culture, language, history, and traditions] too. So I had never been able to shake the feeling that this Estebanico was a man conceived by the Castilians, quite different from the man I really was” [12]. As Mustafa travels with the expedition, he encounters other enslaved Africans who have also been stripped of their identities and forced to assimilate to Spanish culture. For example, Tete, a young woman who is enslaved and forced to travel with the expedition, is given the name “Isabella” by her Spanish

mistress, Doña Isabella. Mustafa notes that the name is “the Spanish version of the name they had given to the New World, the queen who had authorized the voyages of Columbus and the conquistadors”. Similarly, Alihali, a slave who is sold to the expedition in Mexico, is given the name “Andrés” by his new master, Alonso del Castillo. Mustafa notes that the name is “a Christian name, like Estebanico’s”. Both Tete and Alihali are forced to abandon their former identities, and adopt new names that reflect their status as slaves and are more palatable to their Spanish masters. Through these interactions, Mustafa recognizes the importance of not only reclaiming his own identity but also fighting for the rights and recognition of all enslaved people.

In the novel, the Spanish employ names to categorize and dehumanize both the indigenous populations of Florida and the African slaves they capture. The indigenous people are referred to as “Indians” or “savages,” which erases their diverse cultures and traditions and reinforces the Spanish perception of them as inferior, justifying their subjugation and exploitation. Similarly, the Spanish refer to the enslaved Africans as “Negro” or “Black,” which reduces them to a single identity based on their skin color and reinforces their status as property rather than human beings with individual identities. The *Moor's Account* also highlights how naming can be used as a tool of oppression. The Spanish settlers use their power to rename places and people, erasing the Native American and African identities that existed before their arrival [8]. For instance, the renaming of places and people by the Spanish settlers in Florida. The Spanish conquerors rename the land and waterways, which were previously named by the indigenous peoples of Florida. For instance, the river that the Spanish call “Rio de la Cruz” was originally known as “Outhlacoochee” by the indigenous people. This renaming erases the Native American identity and culture that existed before the Spanish arrival, and reinforces the Spanish dominance over the land. This erasure is something Mustafa feels acutely, as his own identity is subsumed under a Spanish name. This erasure is also something modern-day readers can relate to, as many marginalized communities continue to struggle with the erasure of their identities and cultures. In *The Moor's Account*, the power of naming is a recurring theme that underscores the erasure of cultural identities and the subjugation of non-European peoples by European colonizers. Through the renaming of enslaved Africans and the categorization of indigenous peoples, the Spanish have ought to exert control over individuals and to erase their diverse cultural identities [10]. However, Mustafa and other enslaved Africans resist this erasure by reclaiming their original names and identities, even in the face of brutal

punishment. Mustafa's journey is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of cultural identity in the face of oppression. By highlighting the power of naming to both subjugate and reclaim identity, the novel offers a powerful critique of the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for cultural self-determination in today's world. Overall, the struggle for identity and cultural hybridity is a central theme that resonates throughout the novel. The characters, particularly Mustafa and his fellow enslaved Africans, are forced to navigate the complex intersections of race, culture, and power in a colonial context. Through their experiences of enslavement, forced assimilation, and cultural erasure, the novel highlights the ways in which colonialism disrupts and fractures the sense of self. However, *The Moor's Account* also depicts moments of cultural hybridity and resistance, where characters draw on their diverse backgrounds and experiences to forge new identities and communities. Ultimately, the novel is a powerful exploration of the complexities and contradictions of cultural identity in a colonial context.

Conclusion

In the culmination of this exploration into identity struggles and cultural hybridity within the pages of Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*, we find ourselves standing at the crossroads of historical narratives and individual trajectories. The intertwining of personal and collective experiences within the crucible of colonial encounters has illuminated the intricate dance of identity formation, contestation, and reconciliation. The protagonist's journey, meticulously examined in this paper, serves as a microcosm for the broader forces at play in the postcolonial landscape. Lalami's narrative richness not only captures the struggles inherent in identity negotiation but also unveils the potential for cultural hybridity to emerge as a dynamic and transformative force. The term “cultural hybridity” takes on a profound significance, reflecting not merely a blending of cultures, but a nuanced process of adaptation and resistance. As we shift our gaze from the individual to the collective, the paper has sought to contribute to the broader discourse on postcolonial literature. By dissecting the thematic threads woven into the narrative fabric, we have endeavored to deepen our understanding of the intricate and dynamic nature of identity formation. The recognition of narratives as both mirrors and windows underscores the significance of literature in reflecting personal identities while offering insights into the collective struggles of communities navigating the complexities of cultural hybridity. This exploration is not confined to the past; it resonates with

contemporary relevance. The echoes of colonial histories reverberate in our present, and the complexities of identity negotiation persist. Lalami's work beckons us to consider the evolving nature of identity, inviting readers to engage in a thoughtful examination of the forces that shape our understanding of self and other. In conclusion, this paper stands as a testament to the enduring power of literature to illuminate, provoke, and challenge. Through the lens of "The Moor's Account," we have embarked on a journey that transcends the boundaries of time and space, unraveling the intricacies of identity struggles and cultural hybridity. As we close this chapter, the narrative lingers—a poignant reminder that the exploration of identity is an ongoing dialogue, and literature remains a profound medium through which we navigate the ever-shifting landscapes of our collective human experience.

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