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The weather as a storyteller in Lalami's *The Other Americans*

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Abstract:
This study explores the self-nature relationship through tracing the key role that the weather conditions in Arab American Laila Lalami's novel The Other Americans *(2019) play in narrating the protagonist's story. It highlights how the weather conditions echo Nora's deep emotions and reflect her inner thoughts and feelings in the light of her relationships with other characters. The study focuses on Nora's journey of becomingness and reveals that through depicting the changes in the weather, the story of Nora's self-actualization and settlement can be narrated. It considers presenting how reading the weather conditions informs the reader about Nora's self-perception, love affairs, career development and aspirations. It also explores how Lalami employs weather description to show the ways in which Nora ends up achieving self-reconciliation. As the events unfold, Nora is transformed from a person who comments on the clouds and winds and describes the fogs and rains to a fully-fledged character who, figuratively, is able to conjure up thunderstorms and hurricanes. Hence, by paying closer attention to the weather conditions, one can arguably witness Nora's metamorphosis. In other words, Lalami's novel is a site in which discourses on identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism and environment converge.*

Introduction

> "It was a hot day in the valley, even for May, and the air was thick with dust and sand." (Laila Lalami. *The Other Americans*, p. 240)

Arab writers in diaspora have highlighted in their works a number of themes and issues such as alienation, unhomeliness and displacement. To clearly convey these themes and issues, they often focus on the daily experiences of their characters and project their social, psychological, mental and ideological fears and aspirations in, usually, urban spaces that are hostile to immigrants and refugees. Examples include Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* (2003), Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008) and *Carnival* (2012) and Rabih Alameddine's *The Angel of History* (2016). However, Arab American novelist Laila Lalami chose a different approach to reflect the experiences of her protagonist, Nora. The quotation above is taken from Lalami's novel *The Other Americans* (2019) and it depicts bad weather where the air is apparently full of sand and dirt. In the novel, this weather description goes along with the racist act of vilifying immigrants and forming a stereotypical image of them, particularly some Mexican kids who are said to be drinking and doing drugs and who are reported for having been thought to have tortured a cat.

The study of the representation of weather conditions in literature and the relationship between humans and the non-human environment has been the focus of literary critics and ecologists throughout the years. To some extent, weather conditions in literary works are thought to deliver metaphorical significations and to depict humans' emotional and mental stability or instability. This study focuses on how to read Nora's story of self-actualization through the changing weather conditions in *The Other Americans* (2019).

The author of this novel, Laila Lalami, is an Arab-American novelist. Her first novel, titled *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, was published in 2005. It was followed by *Secret Son* (2009), *The Moor's Account* (2014) and *The Other Americans* (2019), which is the novel under discussion in this paper. In her works, she focuses on themes such as gender, religion, immigration and cultural conflict and proves to be concerned about the identity of her characters and their representations as "others". As an Arab American novelist who lives in the interstices of cultures, Lalami's novels are set in both homeland and hostlands. For instance, in the paper "Food for Thought: Un/savoury Socio-economic Im/mobility in Laila Lalami's Secret Son", Yousef Awad (2015) shows how Lalami "deploys images of food to foreground the novel's thematic concern about socio-economic inequalities that shape the lives of millions of Moroccan citizens" (Awad, 2015, p. 109). In contrast, in "Laila Lalami: Narrating North African Migration to Europe," Christián H. Ricci (2017) contends that Lalami's novels make issues of "exile and cultural nomadism visible to Western academia … and weave together voices, experiences, and different Moroccan spaces to produce a postcolonial account of

Morocco from outside the country" (Ricci, 2017, p. 56). This contrapuntal vision stems from the fact that being an Arab American, she herself has gone through similar experiences.

Indeed, Arab American novelists, poets and playwrights are attentive to the precarious position they occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US (Awad, 2012, p. 35). Since the first wave of Arab immigrants arrived on US shores at the turn of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, Arabs in America have been embroiled in a series of legal battles to determine their cultural and ethnic identity in America's multicultural tapestry. As Awad (2012) succinctly puts it, "[o]fficially classified as whites, the experiences of Arabs and Americans of Arab descent do not necessarily reflect the privileges that whiteness promises" (Awad, 2012, p. 273). Hence, it is unsurprising that Lalami's novel reflects this precariousness and ambivalence that mark the daily experiences of Arabs in America. For instance, in an interview with Jeffrey Brown, Lalami is asked about the meaning of the title of her novel *The Other Americans*. Her response is that the narrators in the novel all have the same shared experience of feeling as though they are on the outside and that they are an "other" in one way or another (Lalami, 2019, interview).

The novel is about family, grief, mystery, love and different themes centred around the death of a Moroccan immigrant. It narrates the story of the immigrant's daughter, Nora, an Arab American musician who lives in the city of Oakland and who has come back to her hometown, in the Mojave Desert, to be with her mother, Maryam, and her sister, Salma, following the death of her father. Convinced that her father was not simply killed in a hit-and-run accident and that he was murdered instead, Nora starts to investigate the case of his death. While doing so, she falls in love with Jeremy, her old school friend. The novel portrays the series of disappointments that Nora's relationships with all these characters go through. Nevertheless, it ends with Nora participating in a large festival as a musician, avenging her father's murder by law, fixing her relationships with her mother and Jeremy, and unexpectedly, accepting to be part of her hometown.

This study connects Nora's relationships with the other characters to the prevalent weather conditions and illustrates how these conditions can relate to the events, reflect the interior worlds of the characters, and tell Nora's stories of disappointment and transformation. In other words, by focusing Nora's comments on the weather conditions in a particular situation in which she is involved, the reader can get a clear picture of the sociopolitical and cultural ramifications and implications of this episode. Since weather is a component of ecology, it is of paramount importance to read this novel within a theoretical framework that foregrounds the

relationship between humans and ecology. In other words, Lalami's novel is a site in which discourses on identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism and environment converge.

The weather and/in literary representations

In "Ecocriticism-Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment", Jelica Tošić (2006) argues that the term ecocriticism "is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature" (Tošić, 2006, p. 44). Additionally, commenting on the link between ecocriticism and literature in "Strange Weather in *King Lear*", Steve Mentz (2010) notes that "ecocriticism often treats literature as containing the seeds of ecological insights" (Mentz, 2010, p. 141). To clarify Mentz's point, literary texts allow the visualization of the relationships between man and environment and make it possible for such relationships to grow. He gives examples from Shakespeare's plays to draw on the relationship between humans and the environment in literary works and to illustrate how non-human environmental factors turn out to have an echo in human beings. Moreover, Cheryll and Fromm (1996) cite Scott Slovic who remarks that "the eye of the nature writer is most often turned inward" (Solvic as cited in Cheryll and Fromm, 1996, p. xxxi). The same point can be inferred from Robert Markley's comment on the relationship between the weather and characters as he states that in literary works, "the vagaries of the weather, in turn, often are treated phenomenologically, projecting on to the external world characters' inner turmoil" (Markley, 2019, p. 17), which highlights the self-nature relationship and sheds light on how important it is to go beyond the simple representation of weather conditions in a literary work.

To elaborate, in *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethic*, Joseph Meeker (1980) offers a new reading of literary works and emphasizes the relationship between characters and nature as he stipulates that literature:

> should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment – to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. (Meeker, 1980, p. 3 - 4)

This makes clear that the self-nature relationship should be given importance and should be carefully examined in literary works. Hence, the description of the weather can be read as an indicator to the sequence of the events as well as to the characters' interior worlds. It is there to

impart something relevant in the text it appears in and to draw the reader's attention to particular significations that pertain to the incidents in the work.

In "Weather as the source domain for metaphorical expressions", Izabela Żołnowska (2011) argues that concepts related to weather that indicate the presence or absence of problems in the human mind are pervasive (Żołnowska, 2011, p. 165). She maintains that "talking about the presence or absence of problems in terms related to WEATHER is systematic and forms a coherent network of metaphorical expressions whose structuring is partial" (Żołnowska, 2011, p. 165). She concludes:

> Certain assumptions can be made as to the reasons why people speak about the presence or absence of problems in terms of WEATHER. Problems appear in everyday life and so does the weather topic. Bad weather often evokes sadness, therefore it can be said to constitute a problem; similarly, good weather is often equated with cheerful mood. Thus, in view of the above analysis, weather can be seen as an important experiential basis for conceptual metaphors. (Żołnowska, 2011, p. 178)

Żołnowska's argument is quite interesting and explains the frequency with which people tend to employ weather-related metaphors in their everyday talks and conversations. It is unsurprising then that weather-related metaphors, signposts and symbols are aesthetically deployed in literary texts to boost a character's multi-dimensional representation or to highlight the significations and connotations of a particular situation.

On the role of the weather in literature and what it stands for, in "Writers in the Storm", Kathryn Schulz (2015) highlights the relationship between the weather and humans as she argues that with time, "weather went from being mythical to being metaphorical. In a symbolic system that is now so familiar as to be intuitive, atmospheric conditions came to stand in for the human condition" (Schulz, 2015, para. 8). She refers to a study on the symbolic use of weather conducted by Alexandra Harris in 2016. In the study, Harris gives examples of literary works where the weather is of great importance, such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where Lear is said to be "minded like the weather" and is as charged and turbulent as the storm that raged around him on the heath (Harris as cited in Schulz, 2015, para. 10). Another example she gives is Robert Frost's poem "Tree at my Window," in which Frost compares outer and inner weather, thus linking humans and nature. According to Harris, weather becomes a convenient substitute for another "serially elusive" phenomenon: the self (Harris as cited in Schulz, 2015, para. 10).

In one way or another, a work of literature in which the weather, or even the climate, is thoroughly described introduces itself as an unconventional type of literature. In *Climate*

Change and the Contemporary Novel, Adeline Johns-Putra (2019) stresses this by highlighting climate fiction's "tendency towards the stylistically experimental and unexpected" (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 38). To illustrate this point, Johns-Putra introduces a study on a climate-change novel by Adam Trexler and argues:

> According to Trexler, the nature of climate change – its composite make-up, emergent properties, and unpredictable agency – forces the novel to abandon some of its conventional strategies, such as the reliance on dominant protagonists and character-driven plot lines; instead, he suggests, climate change fiction favours character ensembles and tends to introduce environmental or scientific entities as key motivators in order to portray climate change as a complex phenomenon. (Johns-Putra, 2019, pp. 38-39)

To reinforce the unconventionality of climate-change fiction, Johns-Putra (2019) also refers to Antonia Mehnert, who foregrounds the representational challenges that climate change poses to focus on how writers come up with innovative means to overcome the elusiveness of climate change (Menhert as cited in Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 39).

Commenting on this unconventionality, in "Climate Change in Literature and literary Criticism", Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra (2011) manifest that climate change has provoked a range of fictional responses as "many novels do more than employ climate change in terms of setting; they begin to explore the relationship between climate change and humanity in psychological and social terms" (Trexler and Johns-Putra, 2011, p. 196). The authors add that the way such works explore the impact of climate change on plot and character yields to "producing unconventional narrative trajectories and innovations in characterization" (Trexler and Johns-Putra, 2011, p. 185). Hence, they illustrate that novels which deal with climate change require "critical attention" (Trexler and Johns-Putra, 2011, p. 196) and demand a "reassessment of concepts such as 'nature' and 'place' and an imaginative reach toward global and provisional ways of construing the environment" (Trexler and Johns-Putra, 2011, p. 197). One may add here that not only do narrative trajectories become unconventional with such works, but also climate-fiction readers themselves, for they do not read the work or analyse the characters in a traditional way but rather base their readings and analyses on representations of climate changes and weather descriptions in the works they read.

Besides, in "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: from cli-fi, Climate Change Theatre and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism", Adeline Johns-Putra (2016) illustrates the significant role of climate change in novels as she mentions that "in surveying such fiction, one is struck by the range of uses to which climate change is put as an

imaginative device" (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 272). Putra adds that in engaging with climate change, the contemporary novel has "undergone profound formal and generic innovation" (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 273). She also highlights the difference in analysing climate-change fiction, and makes reference to Christensen, who argues that "texts that focus on the way the weather shapes the physical contexts, personalities, and destinies of their respective characters can help us live with weather and climate" (Christensen as cited in Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 274), and this reinforces the self-nature relationship in literary texts. Thus, it is quite fruitful to examine how a character's thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears intersect with changing weather conditions in a literary text.

This study also contributes to a burgeoning line of critical and analytical studies that foreground how Arab writers in diaspora have increasingly paid more attention to ecological issues in their literary representations. Over the past few years, a number of researchers have examined various aspects of human-nature relationships in the works of diasporic Arab writers. For instance, in "Trees, Rootedness, and Diaspora in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*", Zuhair and Awad (2020) examine how Arab American novelist Susan Abulhawa vividly depicts the strong relationship between Palestinians and trees as "trees emerge as motifs, symbols, and signposts that help the reader decipher the history of Palestinian people and their attachment to their lands" (Zuhair and Awad, 2020, p. 12). They maintain that "[b]y paying special attention to the ways in which Abulhawa deploys images of trees in the novel, one will be aware of the sociopolitical and historical circumstances and conditions that show the Palestinians' agonies, miseries, and even happiness" (Zuhair and Awad, 2020, p. 12).

Similarly, in "Sea Imagery in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses", Yousef Awad (2020) focuses on the experiences of four generations of the Yacoub Family who despite the state of displacement, unhomeliness and exile that these characters constantly undergo, it is "the sea that anchors members of the Yacoub Family, connects them and brings them closer to their ancestral roots" (Awad, 2020, p. 32-33). Awad (2020) maintains that "sea imagery underlies Alyan's representation of the Yacoub Family's exilic experiences" (Awad, 2020, p. 32). At one point in the novel, Alyan's protagonist, Alia, enters into a state of "oneness with the sea [that] connects her to her native Jaffa's sea, on the one hand, and gives her a feeling of serenity and composure, on the other" (Awad, 2020, p. 36). Other relevant studies include Nadine Sinno's "Five Troops for Every Tree; Lamenting Green Carnage in Contemporary Arab Women's War Diaries" (2014), Ismet Bujupaj's "Nature in Arab American Literature Majaj, Nye, and Kahf" (2015) and Yousef Awad and Tareq Zuhair's "Hideous Hydropolitics in Darraj's *A Curious Land*" (2017). This study, however, pays more attention to weather conditions and explores

how Lalami employs weather description throughout the novel to show the ways in which Nora ends up achieving self-reconciliation. To do so, the study focuses on certain episodes that revolve around Nora's interactions with her family members and social milieu to demonstrate how weather-related metaphors, images and symbols inform the reader about Nora's thoughts on family, self-perception, love and career.

Nora's relationship with her family

According to Tim Ingold (2005), "the weather is not what we have a perception *of*; it is rather what we perceive *in*" (Ingold, 2005, p. 102, emphasis in original). He elaborates on this by adding that weather "is not so much an object as a medium of perception" (Ingold, 2005, p. 102). Based on this, the study starts by examining how Nora's relationship with her family members can be perceived in the weather conditions throughout the novel. Since Nora's childhood, her father had always offered her the utmost protection a father can offer to his daughter. He once saved her from drowning and stood by her when her teacher thought she suffered from a serious disorder. Unlike Nora's mother, her father had always believed in his daughter's talent and encouraged her to make her dream come true and become a musician; when she was still a student at school and had a performance, Nora's father was the only father who would attend the concert to make sure he was at his daughter's side. Thus, the grief that fills Nora's heart following her father's death is great.

The mysterious conditions which coat the scene of Nora's father's death go in parallel with the "foggy darkness" (Lalami, 2019, p. 3) which Nora encounters on her way back home after receiving the sad news of her father's death. He died in a hit-and-run accident, and the identity of the driver who hit him and ran is unknown. Additionally, on the day of her father's burial, Nora states: "the air was brisk and clear, and beneath my feet the ground felt soft" (Lalami, 2019, p. 56). The brisk air here goes along with the sad occasion and its harsh impact on Nora, for death itself is as sharp and clear as this air. As a result, Nora feels that she cannot stand anymore; she has no stable ground to stand on now that the person who has always offered her care and protection is gone forever. This explains why she feels that the ground can no longer hold her.

On the other hand, Nora's relationship with her controlling mother proves to be unstable. After high school, her mother wanted Nora to study medicine or law, and when she found out that Nora was following her passion towards music, she was so disappointed. She never accepted her daughter's ambition to become a musician, and she used to remark to Nora that she always had her head in the clouds (Lalami, 2019, p. 17) because she was simply

different. The reference to the clouds has to be examined as Alexandra Harris (2015) notes in "Weatherland: Writers & Artists under English Skies", where she draws particular attention to the association between minds and clouds, from the cumulus shape of the cartoon thought bubble to the early Christian belief that Adam's mind was made from a pound of clouds. She also refers to Sartre, who memorably described consciousness as "a wind blowing from nowhere toward the world" (Sartre as cited in Schulz, 2015, para. 10). Hence, the fact that her mother repeatedly uses this description to refer to Nora speaks volumes about the way she sees her daughter as detached from reality. It also suggests her rejection of her daughter's choices and decisions, and connotes Nora's self-nature relationship, and this is what makes it important for the argument.

Nora notes that her mother's remark later became a "bitter reprimand" and rang like an echo through her entire life (Lalami, 2019, p. 17). On the same day Nora arrived at her parents' place following her father's death, everyone in the place felt it was fine to discuss issues about money and to raise questions of who will take care of bookkeeping and who will handle payments to suppliers. As Nora felt it was not the appropriate time to discuss such issues, her sister, Salma, used her mother's words to accuse her of having her head in the clouds. Hence, following her father's death, the remark was ample in complicating things for Nora and making it difficult for her to stay at her parents' house now that her father was gone. She decides once again to leave the house, which she refers to as "the desert" (Lalami, 2019, p. 20), and which has become more rigid since the absence of her loving father. She makes up her mind to stay at her father's cabin for some time before she manages to put his death behind her and to go back to her life in Oakland. Her stay at the cabin enables her in a way to escape the dry desert which she finds herself in and to feel the presence of her deceased father by clinging to his memory and dreaming of him.

When in the cabin, Nora receives a phone call from a jeweller who demands getting paid for her father's engagement ring, and so she finds out about her father's affair with a woman whom he wanted to marry. As she starts thinking who that woman could possibly be, she seems to be bothered "by the heat and the wind" (Lalami, 2019, p. 117) of her thoughts. She adds that "outside, the wind had grown even more violent" (Lalami, 2019, p. 118), where the violent wind she describes accords with the internal conflict she suffers after the jeweller's shocking news. She had never expected this from her father, and she does not know whether she should tell her mother about it or simply keep it to herself.

At the end of the novel, Nora is reconciled with her mother. She is with her in a truck on their way back home, and Nora is the one who is driving the truck. She enjoys feeling that

"the air was warm and dry" (Lalami, 2019, p. 300), and concludes by finding out that "the desert was home" (Lalami, 2019, p. 301), but this happens only after she makes sure that her mother has accepted the fact that she was a musician and has let go of her fantasies about her future. Nora, thus, becomes whom she has always wished to become despite all the pressure her mother had always imposed on her, which represents the basic difference between Nora and her sister, Salma. In other words, the scene of reconciliation between mother and daughter is not detached from Nora's thoughts on the weather itself, as the warm weather signals a rekindled warm relationship between the two.

Despite being her only sister, Nora's relationship with Salma is mostly marked by envy on Salma's part. Salma believes that although she always did what her father wanted her to do, "Nora was always his favorite" (Lalami, 2019, p. 71). Yet, with the death of the father, the relationship between the two sisters has become even worse. After finding out that her father had made Nora the only beneficiary of his life insurance policy, Salma quarrels with Nora, not believing that she did not know about it in the first place. Later, Nora draws on the weather conditions on the day she attends the performance of Salma's kids in a school play as she narrates: "Outside, the sky was a hazy orange and the air felt heavy with heat. Salma stood by the wings, her eyes filled with an envy that silenced me" (Lalami, 2019, p. 72). Nora's depiction of the weather here reflects the negative envious feelings which Salma has for her and which Nora can personally sense. Salma's envy of Nora has always been a burden which she suffered from, and now Nora can read it in the orange sky, the heavy air and the disturbing heat. Nevertheless, on another occasion, when Salma invites Nora to the gathering she is holding at her place on Father's Day, Nora is surprised by the rare "moment of intimacy" (Lalami, 2019, p. 250) which she happens to spend with Salma as the two sisters surprisingly talk to each other quietly and open their hearts. This sudden intimacy goes along with Nora's weather-related remark that "a soft wind blew rustling the leaves of the sage bushes" (Lalami, 2019, p. 248), where the soft wind indicates that there was no tension in the two sisters' relationship at that specific moment.

To summarize, Nora's relationships with her family members are reflected in the weather conditions that Lalami depicts in the episodes that have been discussed. Nora's discovery of her father's triste coincides with a violent and turbulent wind that rages outside the cabin her late father had kept for his secret love affair. Moreover, the warm weather that Nora is keen to point to towards the end of the novel marks a reconciliation with her mother as the warm relationship between the two is restored. Finally, despite the predominantly tense and uncomfortable bond between Nora and her only sister, Salma, a moment of serenity and mutual

empathy between the two is accompanied by a soft wind that makes the siblings closer to each other. As the next section shows, Lalami also deploys weather-related images and signposts that have ramifications for Nora's identity as an Arab American, which occupies, just as for millions of Arab Americans, an ambiguous position in discourses on race and ethnicity in post-9/11 America.

Nora's ethnic identity

The rejection of Nora's ethnicity as an Arab Muslim immigrant in the States is evident throughout the novel. The fact that she was bullied at school because of her Moroccan zaalouk food and that she was called rag-head because of her Muslim origins indicates that it is not easy for a person to deviate from the dominant stream and to establish his or her own identity in the States. During the investigations on her father's death, Nora notes that detective Coleman's questions imply blame of her Muslim father and do not seem to accuse someone of killing him, such as "Did he have money troubles, did he use drugs, did he gamble, did he have enemies" (Lalami, 2019, p. 6). On the other hand, the questions which Nora has in mind seem to directly blame someone for having killed her father, such as "who was driving the car and how did they hit him and why did they flee the scene?" (Lalami, 2019, p. 6) Apparently the two sets of questions reflect the awkward position Arabs in America have been occupying since their first arrival on American shores. This position has become even more perilous as Arabs have been stereotyped as intolerant and narrow-minded terrorists following the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. Even worse, Trump's anti-immigrant discourses and policies have intensified the dilemma of Arabs and Muslims in America and rendered them more vulnerable and subject to misrepresentations.

Accordingly, Nora's recognition of the implications behind the detective's unexpected questions is enough to shake her belief in the protection she is offered as a person with rejected ethnic origins in the States. Relating this to the weather conditions, Nora's awareness of the fact that her ethnicity is rejected can be deciphered from her immediate remark after this incident as she points out that "the wind whipped the flag on the pole and the sun beat down without mercy" (Lalami, 2019, p. 6), where the shaking wind and the merciless sun represent the racist acts Nora has encountered because of her ethnic origins, and where the whipped American flag stands for her no-longer-stable belief in America as a welcoming country where people with multi-cultural origins can live peacefully. In this sense, Lalami's *The Other Americans*, to quote Awad's words on Arab Americans post-9/11, "voices the concerns of members of the Arab

American community who have been historically pushed to the margins of the nation by being rendered as demonized others" (Awad, 2012, p. 214).

Following this, after one of Detective Coleman's visits to their place, when Nora walks her to the door, she becomes aware of the "dust and dirt across the road" (Lalami, 2019, p. 40). The dusty weather indicates Nora's acknowledgment that the road will not be that clean and clear, as she will encounter some dirt in the investigations before she manages to find out the truth about her father's murder. The dusty weather also reminds Nora of the complications and controversies that her ethnic identity as an Arab triggers amidst contemporary discourses of a clash of civilizations, intolerance and jingoism, which are fanned by neoconservative political administrations in America.

Later, suspicion falls upon Anderson Baker, who owns a bowling alley located near Nora's father's diner, and who had been on bad terms with him for many years after they had fought over a parking space. Nora in particular suspects Anderson Baker of being her father's killer. One day, she is drawn towards a family of four while out taking trash to the dumpster, so she follows them. As she does so, she enters Baker's bowling alley, where she feels too cold as she comments, "my skin broke into goose bumps. It's just the air conditioning" (Lalami, 2019, p. 234). Inside Baker's bowling alley, Nora feels out of place and uncomfortable. Similarly, on the day of the trial, at the courthouse, Nora can feel "the air still crisp from a recent thunderstorm" (Lalami, 2019, p. 161). The thunderstorm can be thought of as the 9/11 incident whose aftermath takes the form of hatred, tension and coldness in the air, the same coldness that exists in the fight between Nora's father and Anderson Baker over the parking space as well as in the bowling alley; the fact that Nora's Arab Muslim father was becoming more and more stable in the States made racist Baker uncomfortable, and the air is still crisp because the case is not over yet.

In *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*, Louis A. Cainkar (2009) points out that following 9/11, many people in the United States accepted the claims and allegations that "Arabs and Muslims living in the United States were a potentially collaborative fifth-column population" (Cainkar, 2009, p. 64). She adds that although these people did not charge that all Muslims and Arabs would have committed the attack, "they did assert that Arab/Muslim communities silently supported the attacks and willingly hid terrorist sleeper cells" (Cainkar, 2009, p. 64). Moreover, as Nadine Naber (2000) notes in "Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility", the fact that Arabs in the US "identify according to multiple, conflicting labels shapes the internal difficulties associated with classifying this population" (Naber, 2000, p. 38). In one way or

another, Arab Americans become victims of stereotyping and marginalization and are forced to endure anti-Arab racism. Apparently, Anderson Baker might be said to be the type of person whom Cainkar alludes to, and Nora's father is one of the people referred to by Naber. The difficulties were exemplified in the tension between Baker and Nora's father, and Nora could feel and express the uncomfortable and unjust situation through relating it to the change in weather and feeling cold or hot whenever Baker or his son is around.

In court, Baker claims that he did not know he had killed a man, and that he thought he had hit a wild animal. After bail is set and Baker is released, Nora starts to question what it would have been like if it had been the other way around; had her Arab and Muslim father been the one who had killed the American man, "Would the D. A have so readily agreed to bail?" (Lalami 2019, p. 164). Being certain that the answer to such a question is no, Nora remarks that "in spite of the air conditioning, the place felt hot" (Lalami, 2019, p. 165); the heat which Nora feels in the courtroom, which is supposed to be a place of justice, has a negative connotation. It is related to the heat of racism which she faces as an Arab immigrant in the States, and such heat cannot be cooled by air conditioning.

When interviewed by Rich Fahle at the Library of Congress National Book Festival in 2019, Lalami was asked about the reason why she chose the desert as the setting of her novel. Her answer was that she had always lived in big cities and never thought of herself as a "desert person". Surprisingly, when she went to the Mojave Desert, she felt that something out in the desert spoke to her, and she realised that she loved the silence and the wide open spaces (Lalami, 2019, interview). Similarly, in the novel, at a later stage in her life, Nora comes to realize that she is a desert creature. As a young composer, she applies to perform at the summer festival of the Silverwood Music Center in Boston and is accepted. Before leaving for the festival, and having spent some time in the Mojave Desert, she goes to the apartment in Oakland in which she used to stay with her friend Margo to collect her stuff. When there, she, unexpectedly, feels out of place and stresses her new desert tendencies, like Lalami herself, as she narrates:

> I had spent only a couple of months in the desert, but I had already grown accustomed to its open space and uninterrupted silence: the moment I opened my eyes, my room seemed cluttered, my bed too narrow, the street too low. (Lalami, 2019, p. 261)

Although Nora's description is not directly related to the weather, the fact that the desert is mostly marked by soaring temperatures makes this description a weather-related image. Nora's words make the reader conjure up images of a dazzling sun and dry air. It stands as a declaration

of the self-nature relationship she surprisingly finds herself in. It also highlights a shift in her taste as well as in her attitude towards her surroundings and marks her new rejection of urban spaces.

Additionally, when in Boston, Nora comments that "the air was threatening a thunderstorm" (Lalami, 2019, p. 271) and she, accordingly, wishes she had her umbrella with her. Due to her dark complexion, Nora is thought to be part of the help staff, a publicist, or one of the composers' guests, but not the composer herself. Hence, she again feels "out of place" (Lalami, 2019, p. 272). Thus, the threatening storm can be considered an extreme weather event and it can be linked to what Andrew Ross (1990) discusses in his book *Strange Weather, Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* where he mentions that extreme weather events are often linked in the public consciousness with contemporaneous political and social events: "Instances of prolonged meteorological abnormality expose popular and official anxieties about the economy of change and constancy that regulates our everyday lives" (Ross, 1990, p. 233). Hence, such weather events can be understood as a means of intensifying the event itself in the plot to reveal the character's anxiety about something, such as Nora's anxiety about her reception in Boston due to her dark complexion as explained earlier.

Nora ends up feeling doubly-rejected, first for her Arab Muslim origins in court, and second for her dark complexion in Boston, and this rejection leads to her feeling excluded. She expresses this in the novel by shifting from predicting the threatening thunderstorm to depicting it as she narrates: "I saw that clouds were gathering for an afternoon thunderstorm, and the sunlight had dimmed" (Lalami, 2019, p. 273). The fading light allows her to become closer to herself and to achieve a moment of "consciousness," to quote Ross, about her social position and her feeling of outsideness in this place. Nora not only realizes that she was out of place, but also expresses surprise at what she comes to know about herself as she states: "It struck me how much I disliked the noise of big cities, how unsuited I was to them. At heart, I was a desert creature" (Lalami, 2019, p. 273). This indicates that no matter how far she travels, her origins will remain at the centre of her heart. Now that she has come to know this, her realization stands as a late confession of her nature-related identity.

The way Nora draws on weather-related metaphors to express her feelings is quite normal. As Żołnowska (2011) succinctly puts it:

> Different parts of speech (i.e. rain as a noun, rain as a verb, adjectives like sunny) related to BAD WEATHER are used to describe certain problematic situations, something difficult to deal with or a state of not being certain about something. By contrast, different words related to GOOD WEATHER are used to describe a

> positive situation, a perspective or a state of mind without confusion or doubts. It demonstrates that there is a certain systematicity in speaking about the presence or absence of problems in terms of WEATHER and it makes the analysed concept ubiquitous. (Żołnowska, 2011, p. 178)

Hence, Nora's employment of weather-related metaphors speaks volumes for her disappointment because of the awkward position she finds herself in. Realizing that she is barely accepted as a musician because of her skin colour, Nora becomes aware of the multilayered challenges she faces by virtue of her ethnic identity.

Nora's confession that she is a desert creature represents her acceptance of her origins after a long-time rejection. Surprisingly, her rejection shifts from the desert to the non-desert. It is true that the desert is still the same, but she has managed to appropriate it and to unite with it in her own way. Announcing herself as a desert creature, she also chooses to reconcile with her mother in the end, and this could possibly be the unexpected thunderstorm she felt was coming. As this section has shown, Nora's cultural and ethnic identity has been shaped by her experiences as an Arab in America. In her attempt to gradually come to terms with her ethnic identity, Nora's realization is intricately linked to the changing weather-related metaphors and images she constantly conjures up.

Nora and love

Jeremy Gerocki is a white American friend of Nora who suddenly re-appears after the death of her father, and she finds out that he had become a cop. Not only does Nora seem to feel at ease with Jeremy, but she also seems to be undisturbed by the weather when Jeremy is around most of the time, as the weather conditions become better in his presence. Having renewed their relationship, Nora's feelings towards him are refreshed. Comparing him and her mother and sister, she says:

> The time I spent with Jeremy was a private solace, a few hours when there was no fighting with my sister, no criticism from my mother, no disappointment in myself. I could just *be* even if it was for only a short while. He was the grown up version of the boy I had always known, kind and funny and warm. (Lalami, 2019, p. 180)

The warmth which Nora refers to and which she can feel in Jeremy's presence is due to the fact that Jeremy accepts Nora the way she is. This is in sharp contrast with the situation she finds herself in when she enters Baker's bowling alley and immediately feels cold. At the same time, the fact that Jeremy used to play music with Nota at school makes him interested in listening to her playing music at the cabin. Hence, the fact that he re-appears in her life only after the death

of her father, who always supported her and believed in her talent, makes him a substitute for the loving father whose warm feelings towards her have constantly shielded her from psychological wounds and adequately wrapped her up emotionally and mentally.

At one time, Jeremy takes Nora to the Hidden Valley. On their way, Nora remarks that "the sky was the color of a ripe apricot" (Lalami, 2019, p. 136), indicating that the sun was setting. She expresses her fear of nightfall by commenting, "Soon it would be night, the cabin would be cast in even deeper silence, and I would be alone again, facing my score" (Lalami, 2019, p. 136). When they reach the Hidden Valley, Nora discovers that in Jeremy's presence, "though the moon was still low in the sky, it was bright enough that there was no need for a flashlight" (Lalami, 2019, p. 137). This foreshadows the role that Jeremy is going to play in Nora's life as well as in the investigations. In the light of her rejected ethnicity, Nora proves to be anxious about her father's case as discussed earlier. Nevertheless, it can be inferred from the way she describes the sky and the light she finds when with Jeremy that no matter how unclear and dark the investigations are going to be, with the help of Jeremy, things are going to be fine and clear.

Additionally, following the trial, Jeremy goes to see Nora at the cabin and fixes the air conditioning unit's filter pads for her. He changes the pads which are filled with dust and replaces the old and rusty metal braces that held the pads with new ones. Doing so, Jeremy turns out to have control over the disturbing heat at the cabin and allows Nora to enjoy "the cool air" (Lalami, 2019, p. 170). Thus, with his position as a cop, with his colour as white, and with his nationality as an American, Jeremy would lower the heat of racism that is imposed on Nora and would add light where needed to help her reveal the truth. Walking with him along the road, Nora points out that no further light is needed. All is made clear when with him.

Nevertheless, Nora's intimate relationship with Jeremy is interrupted by her disturbing awareness that he participated in the war against Iraq and "that he was an agent of the state" (Lalami, 2019, p. 94). At one time, when Jeremy goes to Nora's cabin, he finds out that his friend Fierro has followed them, so he quarrels with him, beats him up, and violently grabs Nora, which causes a bruise on her wrist. Nora does not take this calmly. She holds him responsible for Fierro's unacceptable behaviour, and she expresses how uncomfortable she feels about Jeremy's act by commenting on the weather as she says, "The sun was high in the sky and, though we stood in the shade of awning, the heat reached us, making us both uncomfortable" (Lalami, 2019, p. 265). In other words, despite the fact that Jeremy's participation in Iraq was part of the past, and although they "stood in the shade" from its direct impact, she comes to realize that its heat could reach them, and she confesses that they both felt

uncomfortable with that. Nora cannot accept that Jeremy had accepted to be part of the lie when he went to Iraq believing that he was doing the right thing. At this moment, Nora decides to break up with Jeremy.

Nevertheless, Jeremy once again comes back into Nora's life at the end of the novel. Revealing the truth about the crime that had taken place, Jeremy ends up breaking the heat of injustice imposed on Nora as an Arab Muslim, thus bringing the actual light she was desperately in need for, and this turns out to be the reason why they get together once again. Jeremy finds out about the suspended driving licence of Mr. Baker's son, A. J, and through investigations, he comes to conclude that A. J. was the one who had killed Nora's father and let his father take the fall for him so as not to be jailed. When Jeremy does so, Nora reconciles with him too, ignoring what she knew about his participation in the war against Iraq. To conclude, as this section has showed, Nora's love affair with Jeremy can be traced along the changing weather conditions that they carefully navigate. It is a love story that is characterized by warm, hot and cold feelings.

Nora the musician

Music plays an integral role in Nora's life. She listens to music to become capable of "escaping the desert" (Lalami, 2019, p. 20) which she finds at her parent's house, where the word desert highlights the dry and rigid relationship between her father and mother as well as between her and her mother. Music also turns out to be Nora's refuge from her parents' "cold war" (Lalami, 2019, p. 37) and from their constant fights and arguments. After she comes back from the music festival, she opens her heart to her mother. She asks her why she never asked her about the big Silverwood music festival she had participated in. As her mother tells Nora that she never understood such stuff and starts explaining herself, Nora, surprisingly, notes that her mother seemed willing to listen, and she tells her about her time in Boston and the good and bad things she learned on her trip.

As Nora drives home with her mother sitting next to her, she ponders: "The air was warm and dry. Soon, the Santa Ana winds would begin to blow through the passes, bringing with them fury and fire. How often had I lain in bed, dreaming of leaving the desert someday?" (Lalami, 2019, p. 301). The dryness in the air which Nora can feel when sitting with her mother is linked to the dryness in the relationship between them. Santa Ana winds are the subject of an essay by Joan Didion (2006) in her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, in which she describes how extreme weather can have tormenting effects on human behaviour and can change people's lives. She announces that the Santa Ana winds are strong to the extent that "to live with the

Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior" (Didion, 2006, p. 65). She also mentions that the weather during a Santa Ana period is called "earthquake weather" (Didion, 2006, p. 98), which suggests the destructive changes it can cause. This can be linked to the change which can be found at the end of Lalami's novel between Nora and her mother. She comments on this change by declaring, "something had finally shifted between us" (Lalami, 2019, p. 300). She is with her mother in the car for the first time. She has managed to accept her mother, her origins, her desert, and to start anew with her, but most importantly, she has done so having been accepted first by her mother after having become the musician she always wanted to become.

Didion adds that during the Santa Ana period:

> the climate is characterized by infrequent but violent extremes: two periods of torrential subtropical rains which continue for weeks and wash out the hills and send subdivisions sliding toward the sea; about twenty scattered days a year of the Santa Ana, which, with its incendiary dryness, invariably means fire. (Didion, 2006, p. 97)

The fact that the Santa Anas bring with them rain and fire is very indicative in the novel. It represents Nora's hope that things are going to be fixed and renewed, for the rain would be ample to eradicate the dryness that is evident in the relationship between Nora and her mother, and the fire would guarantee burning the past, in which Nora's passion for music was unaccepted by her mother. In that sense, the Santa Ana would allow Nora to forgive her mother, to obtain a new beginning with her, and to reform herself in the way she wanted.

Although Nora had always seriously considered leaving the desert, now that she has fulfilled her dream, she voices her sudden decision to stay for the first time as she expresses her new understanding of home by saying, "and I would still be here. The desert was home, however much I tried to run away from it" (Lalami, 2019, p. 301). In one way or another, music turns out to be the primary force which has framed Nora's relationship with her mother as well as with the desert since the beginning of the novel. Hence, Nora's self-actualization is represented by the fact that at the end of the novel, she becomes more settled as she achieves her dream of becoming a musician, and at the same time, she embraces her mother with acceptance and forgiveness. The Santa Ana metaphor that Nora dwells on towards the end of the novel is the catalyst for a reinvigorated and new chapter in her life both socially and professionally.

Conclusion

As Ingold (2005) puts it, "the weather is dynamic, always unfolding, ever changing in its moods, currents, qualities of light and shade, and colours, alternately damp or dry, warm or cold, and so on" (Ingold, 2005, p. 103). The reason why these changes in weather conditions are fundamental lies in the way they are perceived as he adds that "perceiving the weather is a mode of *being*" (Ingold, 2005, p. 102, emphasis in original). As this analysis of Lalami's novel has shown, weather conditions offer readers cues on some of the main events in the novel and open their eyes on issues that may not have been carefully scrutinized. Announcing herself as a desert-creature, Nora ends up declaring her relationship with nature. As she does so, she demonstrates her acceptance to return to her parents' house in the Mojave Desert, reconciles with her mother, becomes a musician, fixes her relationship with Jeremy, and avenges her father's death by making sure A. J. Baker is brought to justice and indicted. This study has perceived Nora's relationships with the main characters as well as the story of her transformation in the weather conditions and climate changes. It has illustrated how reading the weather conditions in the novel can inform us about Nora's relationship with her family, ethnic identity, love and work. Throughout the novel, Nora employs these conditions and changes by commenting on them to reflect her inner feelings, concerns and anxieties. By the end of the novel, Nora shifts from predicting a threatening thunderstorm, describing the wind and fog and depicting gathering clouds, to becoming the thunderstorm itself. The strong Santa Ana wind that appears at the end of the novel with its fire and rain indicates Nora's ability to start anew and marks her real moment of transformation and "being". Thus, this study has shown how the weather turns out to be telling Nora's story of self-actualization throughout the novel.

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