

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Otherness and Unhomeliness in Two Moroccan Transnational Novels: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*

Ali El Abdelaoui
Hassan II University in Casablanca, Morocco

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.6254

Ali El Abdelaoui is a doctoral candidate at Hassan II University in Casablanca, Morocco, and an active member of the Language, Society, and Culture Studies Research Lab. His doctoral dissertation examines the questions of home, identity, and belonging in the works of Moroccan women writers in English. His broader research interests include transnational literature, African literature, and contemporary Moroccan novels in different languages beyond Arabic.

ali.elabdelaoui-etu@etu.univh2c.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5502-7070

Received: 01-07-2025 Accepted: 03-01-2026 Published: 27-02-2026

Otherness and Unhomeliness in Two Moroccan Transnational Novels: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*

Ali El Abdelaoui
Hassan II University in Casablanca, Morocco

ABSTRACT

Central to transnational literature are the questions of mobility, home, and identity. Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*—two examples of Moroccan transnational literature produced by women writers in different languages—embrace this reality. By exploring the stories of Nora and Mathilde, this article examines how these writers narrate the struggles of two female characters living in a state of liminality, simultaneously navigating multiple homes and cultural identities yet feeling unhomed in both. Being on the move, these characters are compelled to negotiate identity and remap the fluid boundaries of selfhood and otherness. As the titles imply, otherness is a running theme in both novels. Otherness—as a process that constructs and re(produces) the Other as inferior to the Self—is core to these characters' cross-cultural journeys. This article argues that, irrespective of Nora's and Mathilde's backgrounds and trajectories, their sense of home is deeply entangled with otherness and unhomeliness. They are doubly Othered—marginalized by factors of gender and race—both in their host societies and in their homelands. Their experiences show that not just home, but also unhomeliness, can be deterritorialized. The article closes by arguing that the writers allow a space for agency and resistance as the two protagonists manage not only to set up reciprocal claims against their otherness but also survive their unhomeliness. Theoretically, this comparative reading employs Freud's, Heidegger's, and Bhabha's theorizations of the "unhomely" as well as the Beauvoirian notion of "otherness" as conceptual and theoretical apparatuses.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Women's Writing

Leila Slimani

Laila Lalami

Mobility

Home

Identity

Unhomely

Double and Reciprocal Otherness

Introduction

In the last two decades, the number of Moroccan transnational women writers has increased significantly. Scattered across major Western capitals and writing fiction in different languages, these writers form an intriguing blend of established and emergent voices. Notable names include Laila Lalami, Saeida Rouass, Mhani Alaoui, Wafa Faith Hallam, Najat El Hachmi, Rachida Lamrabet, Naima El Bezzaz, Sineb El Masrar, Mona Ameziane, Rim Najmi, Abigail Assor, and Leila Slimani, to name a few. Some have already established worldwide visibility,

Contact ✉ ali.elabdelaoui-etu@etu.univh2c.ma
©2026

while others continue to struggle for local and international recognition. Their fiction, as Cristián H. Ricci points out, "is not limited by the borders of the nation-state, but spills over to the European continent [and beyond]" (7). Indeed, what makes it worth studying is its capacity to move beyond national paradigms and engage critically with the questions of home, identity, and belonging. Their fiction destabilizes conventional articulations of home and identity by rejecting the binaries of here/there, homeland/hostland, and self/other. The literary productions of these writers, however, have not been paralleled by rich academic criticism and interest within and beyond Moroccan academic circles. With the exception of Lalami, these literary voices have remained largely unexplored, and some of them have gone unnoticed.

This study, therefore, aims to closely examine Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Slimani's *The Country of Others*, two Moroccan transnational novels that—despite being written within different traditions, English and French—put the pressing issues of mobility, home, and identity at the heart of their explorations. Its significance lies in its attempt to address a lacuna in the scholarship, not only by drawing attention to this growing category of literature and field of study but also by addressing the pressing issues of unhomeliness and otherness that constitute central thematic concerns in these two works. It resonates with Professor Mohamed Laamiri's call for more serious engagement with this "new generation of Moroccans [who] are publishing fiction not only in French but in other European languages" (16). In his seminal work, Laamiri focuses on Moroccan literature written in French and English, noting that they share different historical and cultural conditions and contexts of production. The first is directly connected to colonialism, whereas the second is shaped more by globalization and the rise of English as a global lingua franca. Despite having different literary geneses, Laamiri insists that "[L]iterature written in English and French shares a contiguity that appeals to a comparative approach. […] the legitimacy and the fairness of such a comparison is justified by the need to draw attention to these offshoots of Moroccan literature" (16). This comparative reading responds to Laamiri's call for a comparative approach to these works as offshoots of Moroccan literature; yet it also recognizes their transnational patterns.

Central to the juxtaposition of Lalami and Slimani is their constant—both physical and metaphorical—mobility across multiple geographies and cultures; their sense of home is therefore scattered, constructed along multiple trajectories. Both writers embody what typical transnational writers are: individuals who are constantly on the move, who also resist "the nativist 'return-to-roots' model or the simple diasporic binary in favor of a multi-locational identity" (Nayar 161). This partly explains why the present study positions their fiction within the category of transnational literature, borrowing Paul Jay's theorization of the concept. Jay makes one of the most productive attempts to define and theorize transnational literature, viewing it as a relatively recent phenomenon in literary studies. He also defines it as the literature of our time, which is marked by mobility, globalization, and transnationalism. According to him, transnational literature is produced by writers who are "transnational individuals themselves, less rooted to a specific place than to the idea of mobility itself. They are interested as much in displacement as they are in belonging" (Jay 56). As Jay explains, mobility emerges as one of the driving forces behind the emergence of transnational literature as a category of literature and field of study. Jay emphasizes the role of writers' mobility, particularly how "transnational literature depends on the mobility of transnational writers" (11). Jay seems to echo similar statements made by Ariana Dagnino and Ashcroft et al. Dagnino considers that transcultural writers, "by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities" (1), whereas Ashcroft et

al. attribute the emergence of transnational literature to the increasing mobility of writers worldwide, resulting in a blurred concept of home. As they elaborate,

> Such literatures are produced by writers who are generally more affluent, more mobile than populations regarded as diasporic, who may feel 'at home' in several locations rather than 'exiled' from home and who spend time travelling, and even living in two or more locations. In this respect, the term takes better account of the increasing fluidity of global populations. (266)

Lalami and Slimani have embraced this reality. Their positions as transnational individuals allow for a reconfiguration of home beyond a single location and fixed or idealized meaning. Lalami was born in Morocco and later moved to the West, and Slimani was born and raised abroad while remaining connected to Morocco. The transnational framework enables a reading of their works as a corpus connected by thematic coherence. It does not obliterate the particularities of each writer's experience; rather, it provides a methodological parameter that accommodates the multiplicity and complexity of their attachments and the fluidity of home, belonging, and yet distinct transnational voices, embodying the rich and plural tapestry of Moroccan literature.

It is worth noting that literary critics often loosely, sometimes even interchangeably, assign labels such as "diasporic," "migrant," "exile," or "postcolonial" literature to works by Lalami and her fellow Moroccan women writers. This study, however, calls for more precision in selecting these conceptual and analytical frameworks because they bear not just different but sometimes contradictory implications. The choice of "transnational literature" as an alternative label is informed by its encompassing capacity—particularly since the term was initially coined to address the deficiencies observed in the other labels when applied to cross-cultural literary texts that negotiate fundamental issues like home and identity. As noted by Jay, transnational literature is "characterized by a kind of conglomeration of subfields including multicultural, world, postcolonial, diasporic, and border literatures" (21). As an umbrella term, transnational literature "is rapidly increasing in use in response to deficiencies observed in the terms 'post-colonial literatures' and 'diasporic literatures' in referring to cross-cultural literary writing" (Ashcroft et al. 266). Put otherwise, it has benefited from these categories yet goes beyond them to establish itself and to circumvent their inherently perceived limitations.

In the transnational paradigm, home and unhomeliness are constructed across multiple geographical locations. Home might be everywhere and simultaneously nowhere. This article aims to demonstrate that home and the unhomely are recurring themes in the works of Moroccan women writers. In both novels, the experience of being at home, whether in the diaspora space or in the country of origin, is open to the possibility of not being at home—aligning with bell hooks's feminist stance that "Home is not just one place. It's locations" (148) before she adds, "[a]t times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation" (148). Also, both novels echo Bhabha's postcolonial stance that "home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement" ("Halfway House" 11). Deploying the concept of the unhomely as theorized in Freudian psychoanalysis, Heiddeggerian existentialist philosophy, and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial reading, together with Simone De Beauvoir's existential feminist conception of otherness in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (1949), this article also demonstrates, through close textual analysis, that Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Slimani's *The Country of Others* reflect the essence of transnational literature. It argues that Nora and Mathilde share the anxiety of living in a state of in-betweenness, having a home here and there, but simultaneously feeling out of place,

unhomed, alienated, and Othered in both. Their sense of home is dispersed, deterritorialized, and never reducible to a single geographical location.

Lalami's polyphonic novel unfolds through multiple perspectives and voices, granting narrative space to her protagonist, Nora Guerraoui. Nora is born into a Moroccan migrant family that moves from Casablanca to California, pursuing the American dream, on the one hand, and escaping state violence on the other. Nora's dream, much like that of her family, turns into a nightmare after being reduced to the intruders, undesired Others. Unlike Lalami's polyphonic narrative, Slimani's employs a third-person point of view, focusing on the story of Mathilde—a young French woman whose journey from France to Morocco during the protectorate era, in pursuit of starting a family with her Moroccan fiancée, ultimately leads to her alienation and Othering. By bringing Nora and Mathilde together, I argue that both characters share the aspiration to feel at home; they long to belong. To that end, they make enormous sacrifices, yet they are constantly pushed back into a zone of otherness by factors of gender and race—described as double otherness throughout this article.

Theorizing the Unhomely: Freud's Psychoanalytic, Heideggerian Existential, and Bhabha's Postcolonial Reading

The shift from viewing home as unreflexively positive, ordinary, and familiar to something estranging, alienating, threatening or frightening can also be understood in the light of Sigmund Freud's and later Martin Heidegger's *Das Unheimliche.* This German term means "uncanny" in English standard translation, but later, it was borrowed by the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who re-translates it into "the unhomely". To clarify these notions, it is worth bringing together Freudian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian Existentialism with Bhabha's postcolonial critique. In 1919, Sigmund Freud published his essay, *Das Unheimliche.* Freud uses definitions from Daniel Sanders' *Dictionary* to detail what *(Un)heimlich* means. The selected entries he cites associate *heimlich* with "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, and friendly ... comfortable ... arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (Freud 222). He suggests that the prefix "un" negates the *heimlich* by producing its lack. The *unheimlich or uncanny* is, thus, the negation of comfort, intimacy, and security. Freud's uncanny is tightly connected with the idea of home. For him, the uncanny occurs when something eerily familiar, like home, becomes unfamiliar. It is also the impossibility to feel at home. Such negation is best captured in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the uncanny**.** Cited by Nicholas Royle, the uncanny refers to the following: "mischievous ... not to be trusted ... Unfamiliar ... Dangerous and unsafe" (9) While *Heimlich* or homeliness, captures the experience of creating what Dwayne Avery describes as "an intimate and cosy domestic life" (12) with a strong emphasis on comfort, privacy, and security, the *unheimlich* is the opposite; it is the lack of such feelings. Thus, the *unheimlich* home becomes "a strange and eerie place" (Avery 12). Avery notes that against the conventional understanding of home as a homely space and experience, in Freud's estimation, "it is the home itself that surprisingly becomes the dreadful site of an uncanny return of the repressed" (12-3).

Martin Heidegger is another key thinker whose philosophy addresses the notions of home, homelessness, and the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche)*. Heidegger's notion is relevant here not only because it aligns with Freud's but also because he gives it an existential-ontological perspective. His definition of the uncanny "is almost word-for-word the same as Freud's […] the unfamiliar in the familiar, the unhomely in the homely" (Borovčić 133). In the sense that, at the bottom of things, the ordinary is not always ordinary; it is often uncanny. Being an existentialist, Heidegger defines human existence itself in terms of being-not-at-home. Put differently, "our

being in the world, the world that is our home, is marked by the uncanny discovery that we are not at home in the world" (Krell 44). In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger stresses the fact that "uncanniness means […] not-being-at-home" (181). For him, "the fundamental character of our being in the world is uncanny, unhomely, not at home" (Royle 4). Heidegger puts much emphasis on anxiety, implying that "in anxiety one has an 'uncanny' ['*unheimlich*'] feeling" (183). Elaborating on Heidegger's uncanny, Soudabeh Gholami says, "Our familiarity with the world makes it *heimlich* or homely, but when we are seized by anxiety, the world becomes *unheimlich* or uncanny. The detachment caused by anxiety makes us estranged in the world" (38). Put in different terms, in the mood of anxiety, the once familiar and safe home-like world becomes unfamiliar, alien and even a threat, where one "feels a sense of disquiet or unease—a strange or eerie feeling" (Withy 2). Like Freud's definition, Heidegger's interpretation of the uncanny also highlights the "negation of home as a safe and intimate space. In moments of anxiety, as Eric Kligerman explains, "there is no definite datum or reference to one's surroundings, and this uncertainty creates the uncanny feeling in which one feels no longer at home in one's familiar surroundings. While during the condition of anxiety, Being-in-the-world becomes a not at home (Kligerman 86).

While Freud focuses on the return of the repressed and Heidegger on anxiety as basic activators of the not-being-at-home, Homi Bhabha, on the other hand, associates it with mobility and displacements as contemporary conditions of the globalized, transnational, and postcolonial world. While borrowing from both Freud and Heidegger, Bhabha rejects the conventional English definition of uncanny and re-translates it into unhomely. In "The World and the Home," Bhabha reinterprets the term and resituates it in a postcolonial context to capture the experience of what he terms "the freak displacement" (145) and the estrangement experienced by individuals and communities in various postcolonial contexts. Such contexts "gave rise to the identities that emerge as a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar and the feeling of unhomeliness" (Akçeşme 22). Bhabha insists that unhomeliness is not homelessness. For him, "the unhomely ... has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (142). More importantly, it "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home" (141). It is a liminal condition experienced by those subjects navigating in-between spaces and hybrid identities. As he points out, the border between home and world becomes confused and uncannily in [the] displacement [of these individual subjects] (141). Commonly, these subjects might "feel at home and strange or estranged at the same time, or to feel not at home even when one is at home" (Bryne 70). Like Freud and Heidegger, Bhabha's unhomely refers to the uncomfortable realization that home quickly becomes unfamiliar and alien, not from a psychoanalytical or existential perspective, but from a postcolonial one. Regardless of their different readings and interpretations, the three provide a solid analytical framework to explore what Royle describes as "peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar" (1), especially with respect to Lalami's and Slimani's treatment of the theme of home.

Theorizing Otherness: From Hegel to Simone De Beauvoir

Following René Descartes' popular position, "I think, therefore I am," individual consciousness has been taken as the privileged center of identity, while the Other is seen as an epistemological problem or as an inferior, reduced, or negated form of the same (Ryan et al. 369). Fiction has been, to a great extent, faithful to this self-centered tendency that prioritizes the *Self* and neglects the *Other*. This tendency is deeply rooted in fictional imagination, particularly Western canons. It occurs, for instance, in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, commonly known as the first English novel. Yet, it is best developed in travel accounts and colonial narratives such as the

works of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; similar patterns are also evident in Edith Wharton's narratives on Morocco, to name but a few. In all these instances, it becomes *de rigueur* to depict the primacy of Western individual consciousness, *the Self,* over the non-Western Other. Such a tendency has been systematically challenged by a critical voice within and beyond Western thought. Emmanuel Levinas—known also as the philosopher of the ethics of the Other—claims that the Other is not knowable and cannot be made into an object (Camden 295). In plainer words, Levinas urges the acknowledgement of the primacy of the *Other* as something that remains exterior to the domain of the *Self,* transcending our understanding or control. Though Levinas's ideas have revolutionized the question of otherness and have had an enduring influence on various academic fields, he was not the first to address this notion. In fact, his philosophy was just an extension of Hegel's German phenomenology. Levinas was known for importing German phenomenology to France and bridging it with existentialism.

Simone De Beauvoir is another existentialist figure who imports Hegel's otherness into French feminist thinking. In doing so, she challenges Levinas's position. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate that her conception of otherness is eclectic and, more importantly, inclusive. First and foremost, De Beauvoir's existential insights are indebted to German phenomenology, and to Hegel in particular. She was inspired by his "Master-Slave Dialectic," which, to her, "applies more to the relationship between men and women than that between masters and slaves" (Brons 75). She appropriated his system of thought to her own passion for gender discussions. She joins Hegel in considering that the agency of the Other consciousness cannot be ignored anymore. However, she regards his notion of reciprocal recognition as a naive endeavor; she substitutes it with reciprocal otherness as a pragmatic way to reassert and regain agency. For her, such reciprocity—one that recognizes individuals as both subjects and objects—seems quite impossible, at least in the case of women. The principle of reciprocal recognition presupposes a symmetrical power relation, which exists only between free and equally empowered beings (160). De Beauvoir acknowledges, however, that the relationship between men and women has not yet reached such symmetry. She suggests that female individuals should not seek reciprocal recognition—as advocated by Hegel—but reciprocal otherness as a defensive strategy against oppressive structures that limit their agency and turn them into *Others*. She urges "the other consciousness, the other ego, [to] set up a reciprocal claim" (17). She further elaborates,

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (17)

Last but not least, De Beauvoir's otherness is also indebted to Lacanian psychoanalysis, from which she borrows his big Other to show how women are conceived as opposed to men. In *The Second Sex*, she reproaches her contemporary, Levinas, for considering woman as an absolute Other (96), quoting his ideas: "Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning" (16). De Beauvoir blames Levinas for advocating a masculine perspective and forgetting that women, too, are aware of their consciousness and ego—not just objects but also subjects (16). Also, her philosophy of otherness intersects with postcolonial theory as far as the binary opposition system is concerned. She replicates the colonizer/colonized binary with man/woman. These two systems work almost

in a similar way as they involve power and oppression, as well as agency and resistance. Her radical, even controversial, feminist insights are adopted by women writers in and beyond the West, particularly fiction writers, with the intention of fair representation of women. De Beauvoir's theoretical work is a relevant lens to approach the two works not just because she theorizes otherness and reciprocity—two key concepts in the two novels— but also because of her feminist insights that perfectly align with the development of two protagonists, Nora and Mathilde, particularly with how they survive their otherness to set up a reciprocal claim.

Together, otherness and the unhomely, combined with a transnational framework, offer a complementary lens to understand how mobile individuals negotiate the shifting boundaries of home, identity, and belonging. While otherness highlights the social and cultural mechanism that casts individual subjects as inferior, outsiders, and intruders, the unhomely captures an internal dissonance and estrangement, arising when home itself becomes a site of displacement. In tandem, these concepts illuminate how Lalami and Slimani depict home not as a fixed or idealized but as a fluid, plural, and contested site, where the boundaries of selfhood and otherness are constantly remapped, and identity itself is continually redefined. The unhomely will be discussed in relation to Nora, whereas otherness will be discussed in relation to Mathilde; however, these experiences are not rigidly demarcated or exclusive, as traces of otherness appear in Nora's struggles just as the unhomely deeply reflects Mathilde's experience of home.

Nora and the Precariousness of Home

Nora is a complex character with assimilative traits. Unlike her sister Salma and mother Maryam, who are attached to their Moroccan roots, Nora desires to fully assimilate into American society and naturalize herself as an American citizen. Despite her Arab/Muslim background, she drinks alcohol, goes to nightclubs and discos; she loses her virginity on her first date and later indulges in sexual intercourse with different partners. She adjusts her lifestyle to fit the image of a typical American girl. She changes her haircuts, buys trendy clothes, and immerses herself in American culture by reading Frank Miller and Alan Moore (Lalami 121). Nora unintentionally practices what Bhabha calls colonial mimicry and what Tayson describes as the subaltern's desire to belong to the dominant culture (Tayson 249). Mimicry, in her case, leads to an identity crisis. Nora yearns to feel at home; she longs to belong, yet she is constantly reminded of her otherness and unhomeliness.

Though born and raised in the US, Nora is perpetually treated as a foreigner and never feels at home. As a child, her schoolmates bullied her with racist names like "Taliban" and "raghead Taliban" (Lalami 92). In one scene, she is mistaken for Tahira Khan, an Indian woman with whom she shares only skin color. Nora's double otherness is best reflected in a conversation between her boyfriend, Jeremy, and his American friend, Fierro:

> "She is Mexican?"
> "She is not."
> "What is she, then?"
> "Moroccan."
> "Moroccan. [...] as though it was a word he had never heard before."
> "Did you fuck her?" (Lalami 205)

It is intriguing that Jeremy introduces her simply as a Moroccan to Fierro; this latter mistakenly perceives her as Mexican. Through his remarks, Fierro implicitly suggests that Nora's sole role is to fulfill Jeremy's desires. It does not matter to him whether she is Moroccan or Mexican as

long as she fulfills this role. In his gaze, she is merely a sexual tool, and her availability is taken for granted. Her body is exotic by Eurocentric patriarchal standards. Fierro's remarks reflect De Beauvoir's idea that a woman "is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the Sex,' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex – absolute sex, no less" (15-6). Fierro also refers to her as a "*Hajji pussy*" (Lalami 255), evoking her sexual, religious, and cultural identities as markers of her otherness. Nora's body becomes "an ideologically charged site, upon which the western tradition inscribes its sexual and racial beliefs" (Miraka 193). She herself admits that Fierro's gaze "made her feel like she was nothing more than a body or even a commodity" (Lalami 263).

Nora's sense of unhomeliness in the US is exacerbated when she receives news of her father's murder at the hands of the Andersons. Murder becomes a traumatic event, at the heart of which lies deception. For Nora, this deception is created by society's reaction, which seems to support the violence against her father. When charges are filed against Anderson, and he is brought to court, Nora notices that many people come to support the murderer, but no one supports her family. Borrowing De Beauvoir's words, Anderson and his son A.J. believe themselves to be the essential, absolute subjects, while the newcomers are the unessential Others, the intruders. This is reflected when A.J. says, "I couldn't believe it – this woman came into my country, could barely speak my language, and then sued me for negligence" (Lalami 291). This Eurocentric attitude is further demonstrated when A.J. calls the detective Colman "a nigger" (Lalami 283), or when his father describes Nora as "a black woman … like a man … not attractive at all" (Lalami 283). Lalami uses her authorial power to delve into the psychological state of the Andersons and expose their motives for holding such discriminatory attitudes. As the father explains, "Some people say I should be grateful for the business that the newcomers are bringing to the town, but the way I see it, they're changing this place and wanting me to be grateful for it. They didn't ask if we wanted them there; they just came" (Lalami 68). In her portrayal of these characters, Lalami exposes the hostile reaction of the Eurocentric *Self* when it encounters its problematic *Other*, who seeks to share the same space. She seems to juxtapose being white with being racist. Similar to Hegel's master-slave dialectic and De Beauvoir's male-female binary, Lalami contrasts the Anderson family with peripheral identities to show how the former yearns to force the latter to exist on the margins. Interestingly, at the end of her narrative, Lalami takes revenge on her characters by dragging the Andersons down under the same wheel of disillusionment.

Nora struggles to feel at home in American society, where she becomes a sufferer. She experiences similar unhomeliness within her family house after resisting the normative roles dictated by her patriarchal culture. Michael Allen Fox, quoting Maya Angelou, explains that home is conventionally understood as "a safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned" (Fox 4). However, at her family home, Nora is subjected to her mother's constant questioning and endless comparisons. Her mom has spent years trying to mold her into someone she could be proud of, wanting her to be like Salma, Nora's sister, to find a better job, to apply for law school, and "to find a nice Muslim doctor or engineer and marry him" (Lalami 263). But Nora cannot fit within these patterns. She realizes that she "couldn't live in that home any longer" and was "desperate to leave" (Lalami 37). After her father passes away, she returns home just to realize that "she couldn't stay at the house with her mother" (Lalami 96). Aligning with Sara Ahmed's assertion that "there is already strangeness within the home itself" (340), I argue that Nora becomes estranged and alienated in the host culture, treated as an outsider, and in her native culture, where she is cast as different and therefore rejected.

Nora is caught between two unhomely worlds, feeling neither fully at home in the US nor entirely connected to her family. Her unhomeliness is a result of cultural displacement, anxiety

resulting from living in a state of in-betweenness, and the uncanny realization that having a home here and there turns into a feeling of being out of place in both. As the narrative draws to a close, Nora openly admits she has never felt more alone, left with only her uncertainties. From this point onwards, Nora becomes aware of the liminality and precariousness of her situation, manages not only to develop new ways of being and belonging in her unhomely world but also to interrogate home and expose its wrongdoings.

As the narrative progresses, Nora develops what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo calls border thinking, or what Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi terms double critique—reflecting a form of awareness that emerges from inhabiting multiple cultural locations and which allows for resisting binary closure and erasures, compelling a rethinking of oppressive structures in both home and host societies. Nora's in-betweenness does not merely situate her between two worlds; it enables her to see the limits and exclusions of both systems from within, articulating a critique that neither position alone could produce. From this liminal position, she interrogates the racialized logic of American society, often idealized as a "melting pot," by exposing its conditional distribution of humanity. Reflecting on her father's death, she implicitly exposes the double standards prevailing in American society: "Growing up in this town, I had long ago learned that the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven" (Lalami 165). This recognition signals more than personal grievance; it reveals an awareness of how Eurocentric racial discourse constructs the Arab/Muslim identity as its perpetual Other.

Beyond critiquing Eurocentrism, she confronts the normative expectations and the cultural scripts of her native heritage. The narrative gradually reveals a self-aware, autonomous version of her as someone who abhors cultural conformity and predetermined roles assigned by society. At some point, she becomes convinced that her parents' house is not a home anymore; she "couldn't live in that home any longer" and she "was desperate to leave" (Lalami 37). Against her mother's wishes, Nora leaves home to pursue a career in the music industry rather than law or medicine. After her father's death, she returns home but quickly understands that "she couldn't stay at the house with her mother" (96). Nora's choice to marry her boyfriend Jeremy, despite her mother's objections, reaffirms her resistance and assertion of agency.

Rather than portraying a sudden transformation from vulnerability to empowerment, Lalami's narrative traces Nora's gradual development. Her in-betweenness becomes not just a condition of fragmentation but a site of empowerment. Nora does not simply navigate multiple homes but interrogates the cultural foundations upon which they rest. The precariousness of her unhomeliness remains, but it is no longer paralyzing; it becomes a condition she navigates consciously rather than a fate she endures silently.

Mathilde: Racialized and Gendered Encounters

As a matter of fact, every human can be a prey to Othering. This process becomes more apparent when individual subjects move across geographical and cultural borders, especially if they are female. Slimani and Lalami focus their narratives on female protagonists, addressing the issue of double otherness—the experience of being doubly marginalized or facing multiple forms of otherness, including race and gender. In *The Country of Others*, double otherness captures Mathilde's experience in a foreign setting as she struggles to make a home away from home. Mathilde faces racial discrimination and gender oppression, yet she refuses to submit.

The Country of Others revolves around the story of Mathilde, a young French woman who marries Amine, a Moroccan soldier in the French Army during World War II. Mathilde and Amine settled in a small village near Meknes in 1944. Slimani's narrative symbolically highlights the parallel journeys of a country and a family amidst turmoil. As Morocco struggles

for independence and national identity, Mathilde faces her own challenges, realizing that by coming to Amine's alien country, she becomes deprived of home, freedom, and, more importantly, identity.

Like Nora, Mathilde makes massive efforts to integrate into Moroccan society. She masters Darija to communicate with her husband's family and the local community, dresses the way Moroccans do, fasts during Ramadan, and even converts to Islam. Time and again, and against her will, she covers her face, particularly while visiting public spaces in the old Medina. In doing so, Mathilde inverts Bhabha's model of colonial mimicry. Throughout her story, Mathilde negotiates her identity within a complex web of relationships that includes, but is not limited to, her husband, his family and community, and the local and French communities in Morocco. Her double otherness manifests in these different encounters.

In Morocco, Mathilde notices radical changes in her husband's behavior toward her. The gentle romantic Amine she once met in Alsace is no longer the same—no more laughter, no more passion. Weighed down by social and cultural restrictions, worries, and humiliations in his homeland, he becomes, to her, the worst version of himself. He develops a tendency to repress and dominate her, becoming the one who explains the rules, decides the path they should follow, and traces the borders of modesty, shame, and decorum (Slimani 10). At first, Mathilde shows little resistance to his orders; the more he exercises control over her, the more dependent, obedient, and submissive she becomes. It is revealed that she listens carefully, like a child, when he tells her, "You can't do that" or "We can't afford that" (Slimani 26). Back home, Amine adopts a purely patriarchal mindset, trying to mold her to fit within the established patterns of his society. In turn, Mathilde, borrowing De Beauvoir's expression, "cannot think of herself without [him]" (De Beauvoir 15). When Amine returns home late, she "felt ashamed at surrendering to panic, [crying and thinking] if Amine didn't return, she would feel completely lost, with no money, no friends" (Slimani 12). By joining him in Morocco, Mathilde aspires to make a home away from home, yet she ends up enduring the loneliness of domestic life, the brutality of a man, and the foreignness of a country (Slimani 26). She realizes this journey strips her of the freedom, independence, and authority she once had. The rebellious girl from Alsace becomes a conformist, tamed not only by her husband but also by the rigid rules of his country. Gradually, she conforms to the expectations of Amine's patriarchal society. Mathilde feels trapped in her role as a (m)other and housewife; she is swallowed up and slowly fades away with her pregnancies as well as by the small domestic chores and the endless repetition of the same tasks which end up eating her soul (Slimani 248). She voices her struggle to her sister Corinne, saying, "you can't imagine what it's like being married to a native, in a town like this" (145).

For Amine's family and local community, this marriage represents a cultural transgression. For his family, in particular, Amine violates the established norms by marrying an emancipated European woman. Her emancipation contradicts their vision of a typical housewife, someone like his mother, Mouilala, who is conditioned to be submissive and devoted. Amine does not see his marriage as a transgression but as revenge. He views her as a booty or strange reward for his courage in the liberation war. He often slaps, spits on, drags her by the hair, and verbally humiliates her (268). Symbolically, Mathilde reminds him of colonial France. By brutalizing her, he seeks revenge for his country and aims to prove to his people that he is not a traitor. Throughout the novel, Amine maintains a hierarchical relationship with his French wife, seeing himself as superior to her.

This sentiment is shared by Amine's local community, which regards Mathilde as a prey, an invader. Her French background often triggers aggressive reactions against her. Mathilde's presence in Morocco coincides with the exile of Mohamed V, the king of Morocco, by the

French colonial administration. This event historically made life difficult for French citizens in Morocco. Mathilde herself was nervous about her safety. Now and then, she is shot by dubious or mocking stares. Twice assaulted in the streets, Mathilde—fearing that her husband would forbid her to leave the house—chooses not to tell him. In response to these attacks, she feels compelled to hide her identity beneath the *melhaf* to disguise herself as a local and thus evade further violence.

Mathilde realizes, late, that she has made the worst mistake of her life. Her journey from France to Morocco to make a home elsewhere, away from her original home, becomes an alienating and disillusioning experience. With each deliberate attempt to narrow the distance between herself and her husband's host culture, Mathilde loses part of her identity. When she masks her face and body, Mathilde feels that she is masking an essential part of herself. Despite all her attempts to integrate and belong, Mathilde remains an Other to her husband and his society. At some point in the narrative, she reveals that she sees her otherness in every stare she encounters. She slowly feels as though she is becoming a shadow, a nameless, genderless, ageless being (Slimani 186). Despite her early attempts to fit in, her height, her whiteness, and her status as a foreign woman all combine to keep her at a distance from the heart of things (Slimani 18). Similarly to Nora, Mathilde longs to belong but ends up feeling out of place, Othered and unhomely.

Mathilde's otherness is not exclusively tied to her encounter with Amine, for whom she represents the inferior gender, or to his family, for whom she is an intruder Nazarene, nor to the local community, for whom she represents the colonizer. Surprisingly, she even feels rejected within the French elite community in Morocco. Mathilde becomes the Other and unhomely in both cultures. Once she arrives in Morocco, Mathilde is constantly treated with disdain. At the hairdresser, Mathilde is subjected to ruthless public ridicule by those who share her citizenship. First, she is mocked for her interracial marriage to un indigène. Eugene, the hairdresser, never hesitates to make fun of Mathilde and Amine: "the tall, green-eyed blonde who was a good four inches taller than her dirty Arab husband" (Slimani 47) or "the white woman and the darkie, the giantess and the dwarf" (Slimani 47). Mathilde is also taunted for her physical appearance. French women sometimes make fun of her "long, solid legs, her strong chin, the hands she made no effort to care for, and then those huge feet, so large and swollen that she had to wear men's shoes" (Slimani 47). They might also stare "down at her big, faded leather shoes, whispering behind their gloved hands. Some of them appalled, others laughing" (Slimani 48). For these women, her appearance makes her less feminine than they are. By invoking these instances, Slimani shows that women can also be complicit in the process of othering, even turning it against their own gender, as in the case of Nora and her mother.

At a certain point in the narrative, Mathilde, like Nora, becomes aware of her liminal position—feeling trapped between the harsh realities of life in Morocco and the impossibility of returning to France. Such awareness helps her develop new ways of being, becoming, and resisting. She not only learns how to survive but also how to reclaim suppressed agency, subvert the gaze, and confront the discourses and structures that construct her as Other. Mathilde defies the patriarchal authority of her husband, Amine, and rebels against the domestic submissiveness expected of her by his culture; thus, she manages to regain her autonomy. Against his will, she starts her small medical clinic to treat the local women. In doing so, she rejects the role of the silent and obedient housewife that Amine sets for her. She also fights for their daughter's education in a society that traces more traditional paths for young girls.

Besides, Mathilde manages to set up a reciprocal claim when she voices her distaste for certain local customs, representing Moroccan society as backward, and the locals as primitive. In one of her letters to her sisters, she describes Meknes as a timeless city while emphasizing the filthiness of the streets, the noise, and the stink of the donkeys, transporting men and

merchandise. Despite her initial conversion to Islam, she later criticizes Islamic rituals and patriarchal practices in one scene. She refers to the feast of "Eid al-Adha" as the "feast of savages" and describes Ramadan as a "cruel rite." She maintains a critical attitude towards the natives' excessive religiosity, fanaticism, and fatalism. Additionally, Mathilde keenly observes and critiques the situation of Moroccan women. She describes Mouilala's situation, where she spends the entire day indoors preparing food and doing various household chores, as "slavery." Just like Nora, Mathilde refuses the role of the inessential Other.

Conclusion

In addressing the question of mobility, home, and identity, *The Other Americans* and *The Country of Others* explore themes as timeless as literature itself. These narratives offer nuanced accounts of the intersection of these themes from the writers' gendered, transnational feminist perspectives. The juxtaposition of Nora's and Mathilde's experiences reveals what it means to be a female Other within a foreign cultural and geographical environment. These characters' journeys intersect in what is known in the field of cultural studies as liminal space—a kind of third space that simultaneously embodies and disembodies. Their juxtaposition not only allows for an intriguing exploration of how unhomeliness and double otherness operate in the Moroccan transnational novel but also reveals that otherness, as a discursive process, prevails, especially in the context of mobility and displacement.

The juxtaposition of Nora and Mathilde allows the two female characters to be examined through a shared analytical lens. They both long to belong in both their home/host societies, but as the discussion has unfolded, the intersection of their race and gender situates them at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and restricts their ability to exercise agency. Their double otherness intensifies their sense of unhomeliness and out-of-placeness. At some points, both characters manage to set up reciprocal claims as a defensive strategy—enabling them to assert their subjective agency and subvert the gaze. The discussion has thus revealed that Lalami's and Slimani's molding of these two characters does not hinder the possibility of their resistance. The narrative space allows them sufficient margins to resist oppression and conformity, thereby undoing their unhomeliness. Both characters are depicted in a manner that resonates with De Beauvoir's conception of the ideal woman: although dragged down under the wheels of otherness and oppression, they still show resistance. Both characters evolve to assert themselves as equal selves rather than passive Others. Such molding also aligns seamlessly with her radical appropriation of Hegel's notions of otherness and reciprocity to her feminist perspective.

Reciprocity is indeed a key concept in her philosophy of otherness, appearing around fifty-three times in *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir argues that women must recognize the reciprocity of their relationships from a position of power (17)—just as Nora and Mathilde do. De Beauvoir insists that women who accept oppression without showing signs of resistance will always remain the inessential, the absolute Other, occupying a secondary place in society. Without reciprocity, women cannot undo this stigma. She asserts that, when dominant or oppressive systems—such as patriarchy or colonialism—turn women into an Other, they expect them to internalize and become complicit with their otherness. De Beauvoir expresses resentment towards women who lack the determination to dispute or resist otherness and who become "very well pleased with [their] role as the Other" (20). In this vein, Lalami and Slimani are credited with trying to pose the question of women's oppression in transnational contexts. Both celebrate female agency to challenge the patriarchal and social orders.

The close reading of both novels reveals that home emerges as an ambivalent space and experience. It fluidly shifts from being a site of struggle, oppression, and exploitation to a site

of resistance, reflecting bell hooks's idea that "in the midst of oppression and domination, homeplace .... [transforms into] ... a site of resistance" (43). Both novels invite readers to confront the invisible dark sides of home, as a space and an experience—disassociated from its utopian or ideal meaning and image—entangled with violence, gendered power relations, racial hierarchies, and displacement. This portrayal of home also invites rethinking the hostilities running beneath the mantras of *home sweet home* or *there's no place like home*. The depiction of home in both novels has also been paralleled with moments of optimism where home regains its conventional role as a site of rest, respite, and resistance, not just struggle.

The discussion has also demonstrated that the unhomely—as a paradigmatic experience in women's writings, particularly in postcolonial contemporary (con)texts—centers on female characters. Maeve McCusker notes, in this regard, "women are especially susceptible to the unhomely condition" (276). While it is not my intention to equate authors with their characters nor to allude to the rebirth of the author, it is, however, worth noting that Nora and Mathilde reflect the personal experiences of Lalami and Slimani. Both writers, while they embrace multiple allegiances and have already established themselves as reputable figures in the West, admit to being victims of otherness and unhomeliness in one sense or another. Lalami and Slimani—like most transnational women writers—find in fiction a homely shelter and an expressive means to raise such issues.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 3, 1999, pp. 329–47.

Akçeşme, Banu. "Exploring Un/homely Lives in Mohsin Hamid's novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist." *International Comparative Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*, no.12, 2021, pp 16-44.

Ashcroft, Bill, et al, editors. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2007.

Avery, Dwayne. *Unhomely Cinema: Home and Place in Global Cinema*. Anthem Press, 2014.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Halfway House." *Artforum International*, Vol. 35, no. 9, 1997, pp. 11-13.

Borovčić, Mateja Kurir. "On Home (Das Heim) and the Uncanny (Das Unheimliche) in Heidegger." *Phainomena*, vol. 31, no. 120–121, 2022, pp. 121–145.

Brons, Lajos L. "Othering: An Analysis." *Transcience*: *A Journal of Global Studies*, Vol. 6, no .1, 2015, pp. 69-90.

Bryne, Eleanor. *Homi K. Bhabha*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Camden, Vera J. editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Dagnino, Arianna. *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*. Purdue University Press, 2015.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Fox, Michael Allen. *Home: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Edited by Anna Freud et.al., The Hogarth Press LTD, 1955, pp. 219-256

Gholami, Soudabeh. "Encountering the Unhomely in the Post-imperial British Novel." 2020. Birkbeck University of London, PhD dissertation.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, New York Press, 2010.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, gender, and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 2015.

Jay, Paul. *Transnational Literature: The Basics*. Routledge, 2021.

Kligerman, Eric. *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts*. De Gruyter, 2007.
Krell, David F. "Das Unheimliche: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud." *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 22, no. 1, 1992, pp. 43-61.
Laamiri, Mohamed. "Moroccan Literature in French and English." *Francosphères*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 15–28. https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2013.3.
Lalami, Laila. *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America.* Knopf Doubleday Publishing 2020.
---. *The Other Americans*. Bloomsburg Publishing, 2019.
McCusker, Maeve. "The 'Unhomely' White Women of Antillean Writing," *Paragraph*, Vol. 37, no. 2, 2014, pp. 273-289.
Miraka, Fjoralba. "Performing otherness for the monstrous gaze: Racial and sexual fantasies in the allegoric orgies of Venus noir and Black Swan." *Monstrous Reflection*, edited by Petra Rehling and Elsa Bouet, Brill, 2014, pp.193–200.
Nayar, Pramod K. *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.
Ricci, Cristián H. *New Voices of Muslim North-African Migrants in Europe*. Brill, 2019.
Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. Routledge, 2003.
Ryan, Michael et al., editors. *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
Slimani, Leila. *The Country of Others*. Translated by Sam Taylor. Faber & Faber, 2021.
Tyson, Lois. *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write about Literature*. Routledge, 2011.
Withy, Katherine. *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*. Harvard University Press, 2015.