ISSN 1799-2591 (print); ISSN 2053-0692 (online)
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 16, No. 11, pp. 3887-3895, November 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1611.21

De-Arabizing and the Politics of Identity in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*

Norah Hasan Alqahtani
English Department, College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

***Abstract*—In this study, "de-Arabizing" is presented as a vital conceptual tool to analyze the process of negotiating one's identity in the work of Laila Lalami, titled *The Other Americans* (2019). For this purpose, a complex theoretical framework consisting of concepts from disciplines including, but not limited to, literature, culture studies, sociology, psychology, and critical theory was developed. Specifically, Said's theory of Orientalism (1978), Bhabha's third space theory (1994), Hall's processual understanding of the nature of diasporic identity (1990), and critical race theory (CRT) put forward by Delgado and Stefancic (2017) will be utilized. Close reading and narrative analysis will be used as primary analytical techniques to explore the construction of de-Arabizing through characterization, dialogue, structural features of the narrative such as multiperspectivity, and symbolic motifs. Through analyzing the various reactions to assimilation among members of the Guerraoui family, the current research will demonstrate that de-Arabizing may serve both as a survival technique and experience of traumatic dispossession, while still leaving room for transformation. Crucially, although the characters are primarily shown as caught in between cultures in Lalami's narrative rather than occupying productive third spaces, there are indications of transformation at the end of the narrative.**

***Index Terms*—De-Arabizing, Laila Lalami, Orientalism, third space, critical race theory**

I. Introduction

During the period subsequent to the events of 9/11, there have been instances where Arab and Muslim identities in America have undergone rigorous levels of scrutiny and racialization, along with being misrepresented culturally. In this context of social and political dynamics, the position of Arabs in America is often one marked by negotiations and tensions regarding their presence within the American socio-cultural fabric. Through literature, therefore, there emerges an opportunity to explore these experiences by providing nuanced and insightful accounts of the identity development of individuals. The novel *The Other Americans* by Laila Lalami (2019) becomes a relevant addition to the literature surrounding the theme.

Laila Lalami is a highly respected contemporary writer who has written extensively about migration and belonging in the globalized and postcolonial world. Lalami was born in Morocco but moved to the United States later on. Her fiction deals with the lives of Arabs and Muslims living in the Western countries and how their sense of belonging to the host country changes over time due to their different cultural backgrounds. Lalami writes with sensitivity about the personal history of people from her community and relates that to political situations to show their struggles for racial equality and other social justice concerns. Works like *The Other Americans* are an excellent example of Lalami's multi-voiced narrative style and use of themes of inclusion and exclusion among contemporary American immigrants.

The story takes place in Yucca Valley, which is located in the Mojave Desert area of California. It centers on the suspicious death of a man called Driss Guerraoui, who is killed in a hit-and-run accident. The core of the mystery lies in the circumstances surrounding his death as well as the possibility of a racially motivated attack. Lalami creates an intricate web of narration through nine different voices, including Driss's daughter, a jazz composer named Nora, Driss's wife Maryam, and his other daughter, Salma. These characters reflect the experiences of immigrants living in a country characterized by xenophobia and prejudice towards minorities. Every person tells his or her own story touching upon themes like exclusion, invisibility, and the idea of the American dream.

Right at the heart of the novel is the complex phenomenon referred to in this study as "de-Arabizing," whereby an Arab individual consciously or unconsciously reduces, changes, or obliterates his or her Arabness so as to move freely through the social landscape shaped by prevailing Western standards. This process is not universal or unequivocal; indeed, it manifests itself differently among different individuals. Some individuals may opt for assimilation into Western culture as a means of ensuring safety, acceptance, and freedom; others may choose to navigate two cultures in balance. It should thus be clear that the act of de-Arabizing is not simply an individual's free choice. This study will suggest that de-Arabization in *The Other Americans* can be understood as a complicated survival mechanism that responds to post-9/11 racialization. It uses concepts from postcolonial theory, drawing especially on the works of Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), Hall (1990) and theories of CRT put forward by Delgado and Stefancic (2017). This paper will investigate cultural identity as it intersects with issues of power and race through postcolonial theory. By way of an analysis of the characters and narrative technique of the novel, this research examines de-Arabizing as an adaptive tool

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

and at the same time as a process of loss, and highlights the psychological, cultural, and political implications involved in being part of contemporary America. Through this work, contributions can be made towards wider debates on Arab-American literary works and on diasporic studies, where identity cannot be seen as a stable concept but is rather something negotiated.

II. Literature Review

Recent literary research seems to be preoccupied with the significance of *The Other Americans* as a relevant text for analyzing diasporic identity. For instance, Abdellah El Boubekri (2024) approaches *The Other Americans* from the perspective of developing paradigms of diasporic critique. The researcher indicates that the focus has shifted from the idea of displacement to transnational belonging. He also claims that the integration is facilitated by the impact of affectional mechanisms, namely love and forgetting, and not by direct confrontation. On the contrary, Edouihri (2021) focuses on othering and disillusionment, showing how the novel reveals the process of excluding Arab immigrants from the social stratum that operates according to racial stratification. In other words, he attempts to explore the representation of such phenomena regarding 'new identities' that occupy the lower social hierarchy. The scope of discussion is broadened by Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2025), who adopt a comparative methodology for their textual analysis of the novel in relation to *Cockroach*, a novel by Rawi Hage.

The analysis focuses on the notion of Occidentalism, which claims that modern Arab diasporic authors have rejected past perceptions about the West in order to reveal the social and political realities of immigrants' lives. This discussion, while offering valuable insights into the East-West relationship, primarily concentrates on representation. In a similar vein, Ait Nasseur (2024) turns to the family aspect and examines how the cultural influences of the West transform the family life of Arab immigrants. Generational conflict is pointed out by the author, who emphasizes the need for resistance to ensure cultural persistence. On the other hand, Issafi (2024) makes use of post-colonialism and Bakhtinian dialogism to explore the polyphony of the novel. As a whole, these scholarly articles offer important information about identity construction, representation, and resistance in diaspora. They address issues like hybridity, otherness, transnationalism, cultural conflict, and the novel's polyphony of voices. Yet, even as they make significant contributions to our understanding of diaspora, these scholarly articles usually approach identity negotiation from a theoretical standpoint, whether that involves categorization or binaries such as assimilation and resistance. It is, however, important to examine the micro processes involved in the strategic reduction, manipulation, or modification of the Arab identity due to social pressure.

Rationale of the Study

Considering the above, this research endeavors to fill a crucial gap in literature by proposing "de-Arabizing" as an analytical approach. The notion of "de-Arabizing" focuses on the more intricate and often paradoxical ways through which people maneuver themselves within socio-political restrictions rather than simplifying identity negotiation into dichotomies.

It can thus be argued that de-Arabizing can be seen as an array of different acts, including switching, silencing, changing one's cultural background, and selective representation. These acts do not emerge out of choice but are informed by larger dynamics of power including racialization, nationalism, and cultural hegemony post-9/11 America. Although the existing scholarship on *The Other Americans* has done much in explaining its themes and complex plot, there has been a need to examine the active process of visibility and negotiation through the means of partial or complete Arab erasure. This paper attempts to fill the gap by focusing on a close reading of the novel in terms of de-Arabizing identity. Moreover, through the integration of ideas generated by postcolonial theories, diaspora studies, and critical race theory, an interdisciplinary approach will be used that underscores the importance of considering the intersectionality of identity in any given analysis. This is important because it allows for a better appreciation of the interaction between race, culture, and power and provides new opportunities for future study.

III. Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the analysis of the process of constructing and negotiating Arab American identity in the 2019 novel *The Other Americans* by Laila Lalami, which can be understood using the concepts of postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and CRT. All these theories help to identify key mechanisms used to construct Arab American identity.

A. Postcolonial Theory

It will be essential to consider postcolonial theory in the analysis of power relations behind Arab and Muslim immigrants' experiences in the United States. Indeed, Said's *Orientalism*, a concept that provides the fundamental premise for postcolonial approach, will guide the discussion here. Following the theoretical background laid out by Said, this study aims at uncovering discursive practices through which Arab/Muslim subjects are defined as always-already being foreign, threatening, or culturally inferior in relation to the white western self. For Said, "Orientalism" refers to "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (1978, p. 2). According to Said, Orientalism operates not only as a form of knowledge but as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978, p. 3). As the author highlights,

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

"the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1978, pp. 1-2). Consequently, Orientalism represents a discursive structure within which the West acquires cultural and political dominance over the East. Said discusses political context that influences the definition of the Orient as "not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other" (2000, p. 202). This muteness of the Orient as an object is precisely what becomes problematic in terms of Arab identity formation. Along similar lines, Said poses a philosophical query that is hard to reconcile with reality. It goes: "How knowledge that is non-dominative and non-coercive can be produced in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions, and the strategies of power?" (2000, p. 200). Since politics will always find their way, it is impossible to produce knowledge that is both impartial and independent and not used as a tool for domination.

In terms of theories about the formation of Arab identity in the American society, it is necessary to point out that the situation that arose after the September 11 attacks in 2001 illustrates well this problem of the politicization of knowledge. Indeed, in that period of time, knowledge production related to Arab identity became intrinsically connected with processes of surveillance, securitization, and racial profiling. The post-September 11 period saw an escalation of Orientalist discourse that Said described as a particular system of knowledge production based on the political necessities of national security and the War on Terror and that created certain ideas about what the "Arab" or "Muslim" subject was like. Arab Americans, therefore, faced a process of interpellation into existing discourses of alienation and threat to the American society. According to Said, "knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control" (1978, p. 36). The Arabs who have immigrated to the United States go through the process of identity formation while struggling with imposed identities. All the knowledge produced about the Arabs through the media, government documents, academia, and popular culture was directly linked to the politics of military intervention both outside and inside the United States.

Thus, it is not possible to understand Arab identity in this situation as a process of self-identification that operates independently from the existing discourses of power relations. Every act of self-representation is subject to pre-existing paradigms according to which Arabness is viewed as suspicious, dangerous, or in need of reformulation. This impossibility of "non-dominative" knowledge production, therefore, becomes the condition under which Arab Americans are forced to choose between adopting into dominating discourse which erases cultural specificity, or resisting such discourse at the cost of always being outside the boundaries of acceptable American identity. Orientalist logic has been intensified in the post-9/11 era in the United States. The racialization of Arab and Muslim American people post-9/11 is explored in Bayoumi's (2008) and Naber's (2008) studies. Bayoumi writes that "in the years since September 11, 2001, Arab and Muslim Americans (along with those perceived to be Arab or Muslim) have been haunted by a suspicious society that watches them closely" (2008, p. 1). This logic can be described using the term Arab racialization. According to Naber, "in the post-9/11 era, U.S. empire produces Arabs and Muslims as essentially and culturally distinct from Americans, as well as essentially prone to anti-American terrorism" (2008, p. 3). Moreover, she states that this process of racialization is achieved through the "gendering and racializing Arabs, Arab Americans, Middle Easterners, Muslims, and South Asians through the notion of culture" (2008, p. 3). Indeed, Bayoumi's and Naber's works explicitly build upon the thesis of Said on Orientalism. Both demonstrate how this discourse intensified after 9/11 through surveillance and racialization.

Bhabha's discussion of hybridity and his idea of the "third space of enunciation" (1994) is similarly crucial for this examination as Bhabha explains, "All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (1994, p. 211). The importance of hybridity is not to trace two original moments, rather hybridity "is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (1994, p. 211). The "third space," for Bhabha, is one in which the histories of that space are displaced, and sets up "new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (1994, p. 211). What is important here is the concept of the interstitiality involved in this negotiation of identity and culture. For Bhabha, the "negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances...opens up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle, and destroys those negative polarities between knowledge and its objects" (1994, p. 162). Again, there is no middle ground. Instead, this is an attempt at constructing a new reality where Arab Americans don't have to accept erasure through assimilation and don't have to resist and isolate themselves. This is something other than either assimilation or resistance, in that the very categories being constructed are undergoing change. This conceptualization is especially useful in understanding Lalami's particular characters.

B. Diaspora Studies

This analysis also examines the diaspora studies, namely the important conceptualizing of diasporic identity as an on-going process of "production" by Hall (1990). According to Hall, cultural identities "are never completed, never finished; that they are always, as subjectivity itself is, in process" (1990, p. 222). Identity, for Hall, cannot be understood as "something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" but rather as a process of "becoming" as shaped by "history, culture and power" (1990, p. 225). Moreover, according to Hall, cultural identity is "a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, p. 222). These important theoretical considerations are integral to any examination of the multi-perspectival narrative of *The Other Americans*, wherein the identity and belonging of the Guerraoui family shift over generations, genders, and individual subjectivities. Additionally, Gilroy's theory of diaspora as a counter-hegemonic alternative to

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

ethnic absolutism (1993) will inform this analysis. Gilroy posits that diasporic communities create hybrid cultures that cannot be categorized into neat essences of race and nationality.

According to Gilroy, "the cultures and consciousness of black people were not sealed off hermetically from each other" but rather emerged through "processes of cultural exchange and intermixture" (1993, p. 80). Gilroy also problematizes "the idea of nationality as an ethnically absolute condition" to argue that diasporic identity is the result of lived "complexities of racial politics" (1993, p. 2). For Gilroy, diaspora "disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness" (1993, p. 111). The application of this theoretical approach to Lalami's novel allows for an analysis of how the characters negotiate their sense of belonging to America and maintain diasporic memories without being coerced into the binary opposition between Arab and American identities. The theoretical positions of Hall, Gilroy, and Bhabha show a remarkable level of mutual understanding and agreement on such an important issue as the anti-essentialist nature of diasporic identities.

C. Critical Race Theory

The next step in formulating the interpretive strategy for Lalami's novel involves the inclusion of CRT as the third pillar. CRT allows for the study of the legal, social, and institutional aspects of racial inequality among Arab Americans. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), there is nothing natural about racial classification. It is not a biological reality but rather a social construct created by the power of law, narration, and politics. Delgado and Stefancic emphasize that "race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (2017, p. 9). The emphasis made by these theorists on the central importance of narrative and counter-narrative in the struggle against racism and discrimination is particularly applicable to literature studies. As Delgado explains, "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" and that counter-storytelling is aimed at "cast[ing] doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (1989, p. 2436). Thus, the above theory supports the relevance and significance of literary analysis and confirms its potential as a method of critical inquiry into racial issues.

IV. Methods

For the purpose of this study, the methodology used will be qualitative in nature with a focus on the textual analysis based on close reading of the narratives. The object of analysis in this paper is the novel *The Other Americans* (2019) written by Laila Lalami. In contrast to using only one interpretative method, an interdisciplinary approach is applied, whereby the principles of literary analysis are combined with those of cultural analysis, racial sociology, and postcolonial criticism. The technique of close reading is employed as the principal analytical approach. It refers to a careful analysis of the rhetorical aspects of literary texts and characterizations. The following questions guide this analysis:

1. How does the author textually construct characters' de-Arabization in *The Other Americans*?
2. How can de-Arabization be read through frameworks of Orientalism, hybridity, and diasporic identity?
3. What is the significance of de-Arabization in the novel? Is it Survival, Loss, or Transformation?

Textual analysis is conducted in relation to the larger socio-historical context. In the case of *The Other Americans*, it will be framed against the backdrop of the contemporary post-9/11 political scenario. Scholarly literature from Arab American Studies, post-colonial literary theory, and cultural theory will be employed to contextualize the text in question. In particular, the study will explore theories that deal with issues of Orientalism, racialization, and assimilation politics.

V. Analysis and Discussion

In Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*, de-Arabizing is shown to be part of an intricate narrative web that demonstrates this concept as a multifaceted one rather than a monolithic approach. In this context, the paper will discuss de-Arabizing as a concept in relation to several characters in the novel, analyzing it from multiple perspectives: as a means of survival, personal loss, or potential transformation.

A. Textual Construction of De-Arabization

In this case, Lalami constructs de-Arabization via sophisticated and subtle narrative techniques. By choosing a polyphonic narrative technique, she shows the fragmentation of identity and the processes associated with de-Arabization through voices of characters that never form an integrated voice of Arab-Americans.

(a). De-Arabization as Strategic Assimilation: Driss Guerraoui

The example of Driss Guerraoui, the Moroccan immigrant patriarch, whose death in a hit-and-run introduces the narrative, demonstrates the symbolic representation employed by Lalami in addressing strategic assimilation. Notably, he has anglicized himself in both his entrepreneurial approach and consumption patterns while ensuring that his public presentation remains in sync with dominant conventions – "It was called the Pantry. What could be more American than

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

that?" (2019, p. 37). His diner offers the most American type of food, and he aims at securing "an alcohol license…appeal to the kind of people…" (2019, p. 158). It should be noted that these decisions are not just contextual features but deliberately chosen by the author as an illustration of how the process of de-Arabization takes place through absence—the Moroccan restaurant does not open, the Arabic language is not spoken outside domestic spaces, and the practices are limited within domestic life.

Furthermore, the dialogues of the novel contribute significantly to the depiction of such absence because Driss converses in impeccable English in his diner, reserving the use of his Moroccan Arabic only for his conversations with his wife Maryam. With regard to his personal life, he dedicates his time towards enhancing his American identity: "Usually, he was in his lounge chair doing his crossword puzzles; that was how he improved his English" (2019, p. 33). This behavior is an example of assimilation, since he makes efforts to improve his language skills, which is considered to be one of the indicators of becoming part of the mainstream American society. In addition, it is shown how Driss is hypersensitive regarding his exposure to suspicion in light of his status as an Arab Muslim, as seen in "Maryam wanted the whole family to go the mosque in Riverside for morning services. Take the girls if you want, I said, but why would I go?" (2019, p. 57). His efforts to avoid being perceived as suspicious through his conduct reflect the nature of conditional citizenship among Arab Americans as noted by Bayoumi: "In the years since September 11, 2001, Arab-Americans have faced a kind of 'conditional citizenship' – that is, a citizenship that is always in question" (2008, p. 2). Even his inner consciousness shows a relentless attempt at keeping a check on and suppressing Arab mannerisms and culture.

Instead of having fun with his fellow Arabs, he tries to befriend white Americans, which is an attempt at creating some kind of social security for himself; however, even that turns out to be unsuccessful when Mr. Baker refuses to befriend him. In the wake of September 11, the Pantry is burnt—a case of racialized violence that the novel makes a point of depicting the vulnerability of such a precarious existence in terms of conditional belonging: "You remember his business was arsoned after September 11th? They never found out who did it. And then he put up a huge flag outside his restaurant, like he had to prove he was one of the good ones" (2019, p. 25). His reaction becomes the most significant symbolic gesture: he hangs a huge American flag from the rebuilt Pantry—an image that Lalami constructs repetitively through the narrative without a single interpretation. The American flag is becoming a representation of the disproportionate burden Arabs were under to demonstrate their loyalty and allegiance to the US. This practice becomes part of what Naber calls the "internalization of the securitized gaze"—the monitoring and disciplining of their own cultural practices by Arab Americans in anticipation of scrutiny (2008, p. 3). However, the process of internalization was continuous since "that feeling of being watched came over" again (Lalami, 2019, p. 294). In this textual construction, Arabs' assimilation into the American identity becomes an exercise in navigating coexistence in an environment determined by power relation. The second-generation Arab American identity, which is marked by assimilation and ambiguity, is reflected through Nora.

(b). De-Arabization and Second-Generation Identity: Nora Guerraoui

Throughout her life, she has been engaged in a constant act between embodying the cultural identity of America as someone educated within the American education system, fluent in American expressions, and successful professionally while still retaining the essence of otherness through her name, looks, and preconceptions about her background. Nora struggles with constantly attempting to assimilate into her surroundings, knowing that "the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven" (2019, p. 165). Nora's childhood trauma creates the template for self-scrutiny through adulthood, as seen when she takes eggplant to school and her peers taunt her as "poop-eater… nobody wanted to sit next to me" (2019, p. 18). The spatial exclusion of such trauma teaches Nora that the visibility of her Arab culture will be met with violence, necessitating self-erasure. Racialization becomes even more pronounced in the post-9/11 era, where "We were both thought to be Muslim….We were both called the same names. Ragheads. Talibans" (2019, p. 92) and "a few days after 9/11, he defaced my locker" (2019, p. 167) along with the fact that "No one came to my side, no word was spoken in my defense" (2019, p. 234). This shows how the phenomenon of de-Arabization is not limited to what Nora does to herself but what forced upon her. By using Nora's romantic relationships as the structure of an allegory, Lalami shows the problems that occur within assimilation. In her relationship with Beckett, Nora participates in self-erasure by saying, "I started to arrange my life around his. Beckett didn't like poetry, so I stopped going to the spoken-word performances" (2019, p. 120). This relationship becomes problematic as well since "cheating had so damaged my ability to trust" (2019, p. 120). Here, she expresses her inability to trust another person and sees the betrayal that assimilation entails: Nora fulfilled all conditions necessary for assimilation, but she was still cheated on, showing that assimilation does not promise anything. Within professional spaces, where she works as a music composer, Nora continues facing difficulty in integrating with the American mainstream in spite of her attempts. Her creations are dismissed by judges, who find them "too cerebral. Too out there. Too something or other" (2019, p. 136); here, the criticism symbolizes Nora's failure to fit in. Even though she has been admitted to a prestigious event, she still "felt out of place" (2019, p. 272). As a character, Maryam Guerraoui is used to represent an antithesis of Driss and Nora's process of assimilation.

(c). Cultural Resistance and Preservation: Maryam and Salma

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

Through the use of strong motifs such as those of dislocation and silenced embodiment, Lalami brings to fore Maryam's act of resistance. The image of "orphaned" is used to indicate that immigration is not only geographical dislocation but also a state of losing the connections which made up the individual's identity (2019, p. 31). In the fact that she misses "her old house, her childhood friends, the call for prayers at dawn," Lalami shows that dislocation happens at multiple levels at once (2019, p. 53). However, Lalami's textualization of Maryam's silencing is not figurative but literal in that "nothing came out; my heart was beating too fast inside my chest," revealing her own body's resistance to American spaces (2019, p. 32). The wedding scene wherein "paroxysms of nostalgia" make her "house a bazaar filled with henna patterns, embroidered belts, brass trays," demonstrates resistance in the form of sensory and spatial excess: she rejects discreet multiculturalism and instead fills American domestic spaces with elements of her Moroccan material culture (2019, p. 53). In her Islamic faith, she has found one resource that resists the complete colonization by American institutions: turning to her Qur'an each day after the attacks indicates increasing religious devotion during a time when being visible as a Muslim could have been fatal (2019, p. 37). These acts of remaking domestic spaces and maintaining an Islamic faith represent her chief means of preserving her culture, yet Lalami depicts such acts as painful and incomplete. Religious devotion creates insurmountable distance between Maryam and her secular daughter, further exacerbating generational alienation and making Nora "like a stranger" (2019, p. 81). Salma's resistance is built mainly around the motif of Arabic. She falls in love with her husband who "speaks Arabic, it is as if music is streaming from his mouth" (2019, p. 196); this linguistic activity is transformed into aesthetic and erotic by Lalami. However, such positive remarks do not last as Salma, "no longer dream in it [Arabic]" (2019, p. 195). The above line is symbolic of a breach that has occurred because the very core of Arab identity—its language—is no longer within reach in the realm of the unconscious mind.

By explicitly favoring one of her daughters for being "married, has two children, and lives a respectable life" while noting that "my younger daughter had lost her way" (2019, p. 270), Maryam clearly shows the link between cultural preservation and tradition, especially when it comes to gender expectations. Her despair is well-expressed through the statement, "my heart was aching from hearing my daughters fight, like strangers rather than sisters" (2019, p. 81). Through the use of simile, the phrase "like strangers" emphasizes the alienation caused by the contestation of cultures within the diaspora, where sisters who are connected by blood and upbringing cannot understand each other anymore because of their incompatible views on assimilation.

B. De-Arabization Through the Lenses of Orientalism, Diasporic Identity, and Critical Race Theory

Said's Orientalist discourse helps to read Driss's choice of assimilation and the way he engages with an existing system wherein being Arab means being a potential threat to America, an Oriental other, someone who is primitive and incompatible with the contemporary American reality. The idea stated by Said in the opening pages of his *Orientalism* (1978) is critical here in terms of understanding the reasons why Driss has chosen to behave and live the way he does. Specifically, Said claims that when creating representations of people, the West has used its unique representation techniques to define "the Arab" as an individual, recognizable, yet dangerous category (1978, p. 36). One has to consider the above-mentioned ideas developed by Said in order to understand that Driss's attempts to assimilate are not a result of personal choice. By using Western representation techniques, he has been labeled as a potentially dangerous Arab, and now his decision to avoid mentioning his native language, to rename his business with an anglicized name, to change his menu into an American menu, and so on, is not his choice – but rather a response to the existing discourse. Driss has accepted the idea that he is an Oriental threat to America. He has internalized Orientalism as it is understood by Said (1978, p. 3): the dominant Orientalist representation imposes certain ideological, political, and structural superiority over Eastern societies. Moreover, according to Naber, by policing oneself and absorbing the dominant culture's surveillance gaze, the Orientalist practices help to impose racial and gender stereotypes on different groups and thus treat them all in an equally negative manner (2008, p. 3).

Specifically, the idea put forward by Hall that identity involves constant processes, rather than an unchanging essence, is essential to understanding why Lalami chooses not to see Arab-American identity as something definite, which one can either preserve or, conversely, lose in its entirety. Thus, Hall's assertion that cultural identities are not unchangeable and static but, on the contrary, are always unfinished and in a process of development (1990, pp. 222, 225), sheds light on the polyphonic nature of this narrative that does not allow defining Arab-American identity in a single way. In other words, Driss is not simply assimilated or, otherwise, de-Arabized; instead, his identity keeps changing depending on the evolving sociopolitical context – the era before September 11, when his Moroccan roots could serve him well as cultural capital, and the time right after this date, when he had to blend in and use the largest possible American flag as camouflage.

According to Hall, identity is "always constituted within, not outside, representation", implying the importance of the particular viewpoint in shaping someone's ethnic identity and rendering it as "never complete" and unstable phenomenon (1990, p. 222). As it becomes clear from the very technique used by Lalami – namely, focusing on the various ways in which the identity of the Guerraouis' family members is represented from several perspectives, there are no such thing as "Arab-American" per se; instead, there is the variety of ways to perceive, interpret, and understand this concept depending on who is looking, when, and from what social angle. Furthermore, Driss, Maryam, Nora, and Salma demonstrate the processual nature of identity discussed by Hall by adopting different strategies for negotiating it owing to their different experience of migration, language, gender, and historical conditions. The theorization of

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

diaspora offered by Gilroy, who challenges the conventional view that geographic location necessarily predetermines one's identity by breaking the direct link normally established between one's geographic position and one's culture or identity (1993, p. 111), offers us a critical insight into the simultaneous claims made by the members of the Guerraoui family of their American identity alongside their continued diasporic memory. Gilroy's idea of the identity that cannot be reduced to a simple national or ethnic identity (1993, p. 2) is especially useful in interpreting the feelings of dislocation expressed by Maryam, whose perception of living in America is that of having been "orphaned" and who misses "her old house, her childhood friends, the call for prayers at dawn" (Lalami, 2019, pp. 31, 53).

It must be pointed out that this is not a yearning for an authentic Moroccan identity that she can reconnect to but, rather, the feeling known by Gilroy as diasporic consciousness, developed as a result of a continuous process of intercultural exchange (1993, p. 80). Moreover, it is clear that the selective maintenance of cultural practices, which Maryam achieves when turning her house into a bazaar in celebration of her daughter's wedding (Lalami, 2019, p. 53), aligns with Gilroy's ideas about diasporic cultural creativity. The same applies to Salma, who exemplifies the very diasporic condition defined by Gilroy through her relationships to the Arabic language. The claim in CRT that race is a socially constructed concept (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9) becomes a useful lens with which to approach the notion of Arab-Americans' racialization as a politically created category that serves a certain purpose for the State.

The description of Arab and Muslim Americans as those haunted by a suspicious society (Bayoumi, 2008, pp. 1, 15) allows for grasping the conditions that led to the process experienced by members of the Guerraoui family in the novel. For instance, Nora's depiction along with her Hindu friend, as both thought to be Muslims, Talibans, illustrates CRT concept of racial lumping, which occurs when people belonging to various groups are classified into monolithic categories to serve the interest of the dominant group. In this case, Arab and Muslims are considered as one entity. The vandalizing of Nora's locker is consistent with Delgado's theory that posits racism as a systemic phenomenon in which individual violence is supported by a larger silence of the system (1989, p. 2436). Nora's experience of belonging to help staff at the musical festival while she was a performer as a composer (Lalami, 2019, p. 272) shows the permanency of racially constructed perception as articulated in CRT. Despite having high professional education and status, Nora cannot avoid getting stuck in a help position due to the color of her skin. Thus, it is noted that Nora's experience also reveals intersectionality, as described by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242). In other words, different characteristics come together to create unique marginality. The example above demonstrates that de-Arabization cannot be seen only as a matter of personal preference or even as cultural practice; rather, it is a strategy that responds to what CRT would define as racialization—an institutionalized system that creates a certain perception of Arab-Americans, making them forever suspicious, provisionally tolerated, and marginalized no matter how assimilatingly they act or look like.

C. De-Arabizing: Survival, Loss, or Transformation

The most politically powerful element in the novel is precisely its rejection of the question of de-Arabization: is it a way to survive, cultural dispossession, or transformation? Instead, the novel insists on its dual nature and the fact that precisely its irreconcilability is the defining feature of Arab-Americans' existence in post-9/11 America. As far as most of the novel goes, Lalami represents her characters as being constantly in liminality rather than the Bhabha's productive third space: Driss's attempt to assimilate himself into America cannot ensure him safety, Nora's professional success is unable to transcend her status as a woman of color, and Maryam's preservation of her culture brings her nothing but loneliness and intergenerational conflicts. This, in turn, suggests that, unlike Bhabha who emphasizes that the third space allows "new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (1994, p. 211) to emerge, the characters of the novel seem to be caught in the middle of the two cultures, neither of which can accept them as equals, forcing them to navigate hostile grounds rather than altering the structure itself.

The entire narrative seems to revolve around exhaustion, loss, and hopelessness; assimilation promises nothing even when it asks for everything, and any form of resistance leaves characters with suspended identity but no place to call home. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses towards its end, Lalami hints at the possibility of such interstitial subjectivity escaping from being stuck between two categories and entering the realm of Bhabha's generative third space – a space where the in-betweenness may lead to hybridization of identity that goes beyond negotiating between the Moroccan and the American definitions of the self and creates new categories instead. The point at which Nora realizes that "the present could never be untethered from the past, you couldn't understand one without the other" (2019, p. 284) is particularly crucial here. By realizing that the past is the present and that they cannot be considered separately from each other, Nora finally achieves the kind of epistemological transition of which Bhabha speaks – the displacement of "the histories that constitute it" (1994, p. 211) in order to conceive of an understanding of the self as constituted precisely by those histories, not necessarily integrated but existing together and creating new identities in the process. Nora's realization of how "I would've felt belonged somewhere…to see myself through my own eyes… I wouldn't have wanted so badly to fit in" (2019, p. 274) shows how she finally understands her lifelong pursuit of fitting into American identity has been a misguided endeavor based on surveillance from the outside – neither fitting in perfectly enough to be recognized as one of them nor rejecting assimilation to remain an authentic Arab will help; rather, it's important to realize the ability to create the conditions of one's own existence by stepping out of this binary of categories altogether. The realization is further expressed in Nora's statement that "private memory was nothing but a struggle against erasure" (2019, p. 223), which shows how cultural memory has to be conceptualized not as nostalgic preservation but as active resistance – precisely what Bhabha describes when speaking about "the negotiation of

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

contradictory and antagonistic instances" that opens up a space for the development of hybridity and the creation of a third objective, new sites of struggle (1994, p. 162). Even though the novel doesn't offer any solution in the end and doesn't show that Nora manages to find herself in the third space, it shows that the awareness of having been trapped between two identities is already a breakthrough necessary for such transformations to happen.

VI. Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This study makes several important contributions to Arab American literary criticism. First, it develops "de-Arabization" as a new analytical concept for investigating the strategic negotiation of Arab identity beyond the traditional binary of assimilation versus resistance. Second, it brings postcolonial theory, diaspora studies and critical race theory together in a common interpretive framework that shows how identity negotiation operates at once on cultural, political and institutional levels. Third, by closely reading *The Other Americans*, the study makes a contribution to the current scholarship by demonstrating that de-Arabization is not only a strategy of survival but also a process of cultural loss and a possible site of identity transformation. In so doing, the paper provides a new interdisciplinary framework for the study of other Arab American literary texts and post-9/11 immigrant narratives. However, the study has its limitations. The analysis is focused on a single literary work, *The Other Americans*, which restricts the potential for generalization of the proposed concept of de-Arabization. Future research may test the applicability of the concept of de-Arabization across different authors, genres and historical contexts.

VII. Conclusion

By theorizing "de-Arabizing" as an analytical tool to unpack and examine the contradictory nature of Arab American processes of negotiating their sense of self, visibility, and belonging within the post-9/11 United States, this study has shown how this process can be understood not only as one of mere survival, but also as a process of profound loss and possibility for transformation, by analyzing closely the novel *The Other Americans* by Laila Lalami. Through engaging with concepts and ideas from postcolonial, diaspora, and critical race theory, this analysis has shown how de-Arabization is not a question of assimilation versus resistance but must be understood instead as multifaceted process of strategic erasure, silencing, modifying cultural expression, and generational transmission—conditioned by Orientalist discourse, racialized surveillance, and conditional citizenship. Through a close textual analysis of *The Other Americans*, it became clear how Lalami's narrative construction of "de-Arabization" involves making it a visible and invisible process: the failure of Driss's assimilation in trying to ensure his safety as he is murdered shows the futility of this strategy; Nora's attempts to blend in to survive conditions in which one's Arab humanity needs constant validation leads her to forget what it means to be different while her racialized perception overrides her professional one; Maryam's resistant preservation of culture leaves her isolated and breaks the intergenerational link; and Salma's linguistic mastery fails to stop the erosion of Arabic in her psyche. Most importantly, the study contends that during most of the novel, Lalami's characters are not in Bhabha's productive third space but are caught in between cultures, with their interstitial positioning.

Nonetheless, the ending of the novel seems to hint at possibilities that are much closer to what Bhabha's third space is about, with Nora realizing that "the present could never be untethered from the past," thus marking an epistemological shift from the antagonism between heritage and present, with their respective positions entailing choice, toward viewing them as necessarily linked. The notion of her wish to see herself "through [her] own eyes" instead of through surveillance implies an understanding that there may be another kind of belonging, one that involves taking control over the definition of one's existence. Although the novel does not ensure the possibility of successful transformation, Lalami implies that being aware of one's entrapment "in between" could be seen as an important step toward making this condition work to the advantage of generating a hybrid identity, which will not be based on negotiation but will be transformative. The ambiguity of this conclusion—the combination of possibility without assurance and the promise of achievement without actual achievement—is the novel's most significant political message and the main idea of this study, namely, that de-Arabization should be considered both a necessary condition of survival and a process of traumatic dispossession as well as a possible point of departure for transformation, because these contradictions correspond to the reality of post-9/11 Arab American experience.

References

[1] Ait Nasseur, H. (2024). Surviving the sense of the Arab family in the West: The Arab Moroccan immigrant family in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* as a case study. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, *9*(3), 432-437. https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.93.54

[2] Bayoumi, M. (2008). *How does it feel to be a problem? Being young and Arab in America*. Penguin Press.

[3] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

[4] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

[5] Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, *87*(8), 2411-2441. https://doi.org/10.2307/1289308

[6] Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press.

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION

[7] Edouihri, A. (2021). Othering and disillusionment in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, *14*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2021.1868158
[8] El Boubekri, A. (2024). New ways of belonging in diaspora in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *African Identities*, *22*(4), 926–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2022.2157244
[9] Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Harvard University Press.
[10] Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
[11] Issafi, H. (2024). New trajectories in postcolonial narratives: The predicament of the immigrant in the host country in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *Re-Imagining Literatures of The World: Global and Local, Mainstreams and Margins*, *1*(1). Retrieved February 29, 2026, from https://icla.openjournals.ge/index.php/icla/article/view/5411
[12] Lalami, L. (2019). *The other Americans*. Pantheon Books.
[13] Naber, N. (2008). Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. racial formations. In A. Jamal & N. Naber (Eds.), *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11* (pp. 1–45). Syracuse University Press.
[14] Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
[15] Said, E. W. (2000). Orientalism Reconsidered. In *Reflections on exile and other essays* (pp. 198–215). Harvard University Press.
[16] Shalabi, A., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (2025). Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* and Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*: Images of twenty-first century Occident in Arab eyes. *Textual Practice*, *39*(2), 261–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2288115

Norah Hasan Alqahtani: An Associate Professor of English Literature, English Department, College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. norhz@kku.edu.sa; Doctor of Philosophy degree in Postcolonial Literature from University of Kent.

She is an accomplished academic leader and quality assurance expert with 15+ years of experience in higher education administration, accreditation, and research. Proven track record in strategic leadership, institutional development, and fostering community engagement aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. Certified in academic quality, school evaluation, and accreditation by NCAAA. Published researcher in intercultural studies and gender identity. She is the author of:

1. Alqahtani, N. (2023). Sufism: Interfaith Coexistence or Poisoned Gift? A Case Study of Elif Shafak`s *Forty Rules of Love* and Mohammed Alwan`s *A Small Death*. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *13*(6), 69-80. DOI: https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2023-0148

2. Alqahtani, N. (2024). Children's Socialization to Gender Identity: A Study of Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *14*(1), 257-264. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1401.30.

3. Alqahtani, N. (2024). Revisiting Edward Said`s Self-Representation in Susan Abulhawa`*s Mornings in Jenin. Humanities and Educational Sciences Journal*, (40), 804-825. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55074/hesj.vi40.1120.

Dr. Alqahtani is awarded Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Kent in Postcolonial Literature.

© 2026 ACADEMY PUBLICATION