

Lalami's *Secret Son*: A new perspective on terrorism

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Abstract: Lalami's *Secret Son* presents a new perspective on terrorism, challenges the old and narrow categorizations of terrorism and creates an important contribution to the persistent discussion of the relation between Islam and terrorism. This new perspective suggests that terrorist acts are not always driven by religious motivations; rather they may be driven by desperation resulting from poverty and discontent over the unequal and unfair distribution of economic resources and are committed by desperate individuals to voice their desperation due to socioeconomic deprivation. The present article aims to discuss the relation between poverty, desperation and terrorism as represented in Lalami's novel. Using selected theoretical writings pertaining to desperation and terrorism, the article focuses on desperation, the way it emerges out of definite social and financial conditions and tracks the complexity of different responses it entails and explores the conceptual terrain that separates, or rather links, poverty and social injustice with desperation and terrorism. It argues that there are many factors, as the novel makes clear, that contribute to the rise of terrorism including poverty, social injustice, deprivation and desperation.

Keywords: poverty, social injustice, deprivation, desperation, terrorism, Morocco

Introduction

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many books and articles have been written on terrorism by writers of different disciplines including political scientists, historians, psychologists, intellectuals and creative writers. One of the major questions that those writings focus on is why a terrorist commit such a hideous act. Among the answers provided are poverty and desperation. In the sense that poverty and an unknown future among people who lead an impoverished life and are deprived

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of the basics of decent life may result in desperation which in turn might lead to such a suicidal end. Poverty may not be the primary cause of terrorism; however, it, along with other socioeconomic conditions, is undoubtedly relevant to the rise of radicalism and terrorism. This article attempts to investigate the relevance of poverty, desperation and terrorism in Laila Lalami's *Secret Son*. To better understand and discuss the novel, it is valuable to start with a theoretical discussion of desperation and its relation to terrorism.

Desperation

Desperation, borrowed from Latin *dēspērātiō*, *dēspērātiōn* and *dēspērāre*, can be defined as “loss of hope and surrender to despair” or “a state of hopelessness leading to rashness” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., n.d.). In *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, desperation is described as the state of being desperate, and desperate is defined as “feeling or showing that you have little hope and are ready to do anything without worrying about danger to yourself or others” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). It is clear, as these definitions demonstrate, that desperation is closely connected to hope and that the loss of hope is the first step in the route of desperation. Studies concerned with desperation argue that desperation is a symptom of larger psychological constructs; it “tends to accompany situations of stress, anxiety, or situations involving a lack of control that ultimately motivate one's behaviors...and is associated with other negative emotional states such as anger, fear, rage, or shock” (Hannan and Hackathorn 2020, 4490). According to Richard Esser (2008, 3), “desperation is a mixture of six elements in different degree: craziness, rage, panic, violence, hopelessness and self-destructiveness”. For Steven Garlow et al. (2008, 486), desperation, as an emotional state, is usually characterized by “a core feeling of intense distress with an urgent need for relief”. These statements show that desperation has components: distress (an emotional state) and a need for relief (a motivation to act) and assert that desperation can provide motivation for behavior. Hillbrand and Young (2008) in their study discuss the influence of desperation on reckless behaviors and suggest that loss of hope fuels violence. This means that desperation not only motivates an individual to act but also to act violently.

Psychological studies have always discussed the experience of desperation in relation to various state-based stressors (Carlson 1997; Garlow et al. 2008; Rosenthal 1992; Zuckerman 1960). Such studies

argue that desperation is a response to a particular stressor. These stressors could be physiological, financial or social and have varied effects on people. Hence, desperation does not have one explanation; rather it is a dynamic and complex internal framework. This explains the difficulty to explain what a desperate person feels. However, generally speaking, people in despair seem to feel a loss of meaning and nothing makes sense to them anymore. They have experienced accumulation of negative experiences and disappointing situations which they could not control rightly. Hence, desperation is a state of absolute despair or utter hopelessness that takes place when everything in one's life has fallen apart and to redeem things becomes out of reach. It is a feeling of being tired of various accumulated disappointments and frustrations and it is generated by mental and emotional exhaustion. Desperation happens when reaching one's goal becomes impossible. It is different from frustration which means that achievement of one's goal is still possible.

Desperation and terrorism

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, numerous world's leaders and writers have addressed the relationship between poverty, desperation and terrorism. Colin Powell, the sixty-fifth United States secretary of state, in 2002 said "I fully believe that the root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty, where there is ignorance, where people see no hope in their lives" (quoted in Piazza and Hippel 2014, 35). Klaus Toepfer, UN Environment Programme Executive Director, observed, "When people are denied access to clean water, soil and air to meet their basic human needs, we see the rise of poverty, ill-health and a sense of hopelessness. Desperate people can resort to desperate solutions" (quoted in Mani 2004, 225-6). In 2002, George W. Bush stated, "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror" (Bush 2004, 473). Again in 2008, Bush said, "The extremists find their most fertile recruiting grounds in societies trapped in chaos and despair--places where people see no prospect of a better life. In the shadows of hopelessness, radicalism thrives...Overcoming hopelessness requires addressing its causes-- poverty, disease, and ignorance" (Bush 2012, 1229). Bush arrived at the conclusion that there "can be no safety in looking away or seeking the quiet life by ignoring the hardship and oppression of others. Either hope will spread or violence will spread, and we must take the side of hope" (Bush 2009, 1429). In 2010, Hillary Clinton stated, "We cannot stop

terrorism or defeat the ideologies of violent extremism when hundreds of millions of young people see a future with no jobs, no hope, and no way ever to catch up to the developed world” (Clinton 2010, par. 8).

These proclamations attempt to explain that terrorist acts are the fruition of poverty, desperation, and extreme anguish. They have stated openly that poverty, loss of hope and desperation are fertile grounds for terrorism. Further, they suggest that poverty is deepened by socioeconomic inequality and deprivation and that “those confronting socioeconomic distress and deprivation are more likely to be drawn to radical and possibly violent movements, including terrorist movements” (Piazza and Hippel 2014, 35). In this sense, terrorist attacks are symptoms of “increasingly bitter polarization between the haves and have-nots” (Johnston 2001, par. 2). Poverty, usually results from unemployment and inequality in distributing resources, breeds discontent which increases the enmity towards the rich and contributes to various types of violent acts and is a crucial ingredient in armed conflicts, riots, civil wars and social upheavals. Additionally, these statements show that poverty and unemployment as critical contributing factors in radicalism and terrorism and put enormous pressure on governments to formulate and develop programs and policies to improve the life the poor communities in order to counter radicalization and extremism as eliminating of poverty is, undoubtedly, significant to eliminate the causes of discontent, radicalism and violence.

The close relation between poverty, desperation and terrorism has been acknowledged by many intellectuals too. Gary Hart (2008, 33) argues that

The security of the commons requires that the perpetual struggle to elevate the lot of those left out must be renewed with increased vigor. Neglect is no longer an option. For neglect ensures deepening poverty, despair, and hopelessness. And hopeless people are desperate people. Desperation is the stagnant breeding pool of those with nothing to lose. Desperation is terrorism’s fertile soil. Not all desperate people become terrorists, but some desperate people feel they have nothing to lose and will stop at nothing.

According to Ariel Glucklich (2009, 12), when an individual “grow[s] up in a refugee camp, in squalor, with no work, land, or future to speak of, death, gloriously violent death, can seem like an appealing act of last resort”. Such desperate individuals see death as an opportunity to flee the hardships they encounter in their life. “Religiously coded attitudes towards the acceptance of death,” Riaz Hassan (2011, 58)

asserts, stem “from long periods of hopelessness and suffering enable political organizations to give people suicide bombing as an outlet for expressing feelings of deprivation, injustice, despair and hostility”. To turn someone into a terrorist, it takes “more than belief in God...It takes desperation, anger, loss of hope. It's believing that your life is not worth living anymore” (Davis 2003, 104). Terrorist acts can be viewed as acts of “ultimate despair, horrific reactions to extremely inhumane conditions in a seriously damaged environment of hopelessness” (Hassan 2011, 60) and hence, “to end terrorism,” Rabbi Waskow asserts, “in the long-term, then we must eliminate the pools of cultural deprivation, poverty, and despair” (quoted in Davis 2003, 26).

Impoverished people have nothing to lose and, in their state of impoverishment, rage and hopelessness, they are more susceptible to the lures of extremism and radicalism. Actually, terrorists do not become so overnight; there is a long journey before they commit such horrendous acts. It is the result of a long process of frustration, alienation, marginalization and ostracism and then dissidence and protest before ultimately turning to terrorism. This process takes place not in isolation but within a larger political and socioeconomic environment involving the state, the government, the family and extremist groups. Understanding all these variables and their interaction can explain why some individuals turn to violence.

Terrorism in *Secret Son*: a new perspective

This causal relation between poverty, desperation and terrorism is clearly seen in Lalami's novel *Secret Son*. The novel presents a new perspective on terrorism, challenging the old and narrow categorizations of terrorism and creating an important contribution to the persistent discussion of the relation between Islam and terrorism. This new perspective suggests that terrorist acts are not always driven by religious motivations; rather they may be driven by discontent over the unequal and unfair distribution of economic resources and are committed by desperate individuals to voice their frustration due to socioeconomic deprivation. In other words, they are acts of desperation and frustration which have been caused by dire poverty, unemployment and an unknown, bleak future. Poverty may not be the primary and direct cause of the protagonist's terrorist act; however, it, along with socioeconomic conditions, is undoubtedly relevant to the rise of his rage and violent act.

Secret Son follows the travails of Youssef El Mekki, a 20-year-old young man who tries to rise above the abject poverty in which he, along with his mother, lives in Hay An Najat, Casablanca. Youssef has been led by his mother, Rachida, to believe that his father is Nabil El Mekki, a well-respected, fourth-grade teacher. Before his death, the family lived in the Fès medina. One day, Nabil and his neighbors were preparing street lights for a big Eid party and he was asked to hang lights on their roofs. While on the roof, he tripped on the wire and fell down and broke his neck. He died instantly. After Nabil's death, Youssef's mother was left with nobody to support. Unable to pay the apartment rent, she moved to Hay An Najat where she built a one-room house with a tin roof. She has refused to stay in touch with her husband's parents after his death because, according to her accounts, they have cheated her out of her inheritance. Youssef has believed his mother's account. However, at the age of 20, he discovers his true self—he is actually Youssef Amrani, not El Mekki, an illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman and that his father is alive and not dead as told by his mother. After this discovery, Youssef establishes contact with his father who provides him with everything he needs to transform him from a slum child to the son of a wealthy family. Youssef, all of a sudden, ascends from someone with nothing, living in dire poverty into a rich young man living in Anfa, one of the richest neighborhoods in Casablanca. However, Nabil's brothers and wife force him to reject his son so that he does not receive his share of inheritance. After rejection, Youssef suffers a psychological trauma, gets acquainted with Hatim, the head of the Party, who persuades him to commit a terrorist act and kill Farid Benaboud. It is within this framework that Youssef's journey from an innocent youngster to a killer can be traced.

Youssef's transformation to a terrorist is not driven by a religious zeal or a *Jihadist* belief; rather it is a reaction to the impoverishment and poverty in which he has been living since his birth. To understand Youssef's transformation, it is better to start with his life in Hay An Najat. Since his birth, Youssef has been living with his mother an impoverished life in one of the most deplorable areas in Casablanca. Hay An Najat, whose stinking and woeful alleys are the only home that Youssef has ever known, is a poverty-stricken slum where the poorest people of Casablanca dwell in shacks and cottages made of corrugated tin. The streets are muddy and full of "puddles of water, heaps of trash, and pieces of metal" (Lalami 2009, 7). There are heaps of trash in

every corner and its smell “wafted through the air” (Lalami 2009, 55) and the “stench of garbage mixed with the odor of car exhaust and the stink of old, refried sardines” (Lalami 2009, 193) permeates the narrow dirty alleys which are always crowded and full of “peddlers and smugglers, hustlers and hawkers, brokers and fixers, vendors and dealers, beggars and drifters—all the people who, in the end, made up the other, the greater half of the country” (Lalami 2009, 132). People there are always busy: “women getting water, girls carrying shopping bags, drug addicts huddled in groups, merchants peddling their wares from rickety bicycles, teenagers hawking single cigarettes, children playing marbles” (Lalami 2009, 193). Hay An Najat is a place where “houseflies thrived, growing bigger and bolder. They grazed on piles of trash, competing with sheep and cows for tea grounds, vegetable peels, and empty containers of yogurt. Mosquitoes appeared, and flying ants, and gray moths, and gnats” (Lalami 2009, 209). This appalling condition of the slum is clearly seen in Amal’s reaction when she visits the slum. She wonders if there are people who still live in such a condition:

She started to walk up the hill, toward the tin-roofed houses where thousands lived. There was poverty here the like of which she had never seen, and she averted her eyes as if she were looking at the most private, the most intimate of sights. How was it possible to live like this? (Lalami 2009, 262-263)

The inhabitants of Hay An Najat have no access to essential sanitary facilities which are a prerequisite for good health. They lack access to basic services such as safe drinking water, streets and lights, drainage, and health care. The slum, in addition to being a manifestation of poverty and deprivation, stands for dereliction and laxity of the authorities. Successive governments have neglected the wellbeing of its dwellers, and none “talked about, except...when there was a natural catastrophe, a terrorist attack, or a legislative election” (Lalami 2009, 199).

The shack where Youssef and his mother live is not different from others in the slum. It is a one-room shack with no windows and its roof is made of corrugated tin held down by bricks and rocks. The yard, open to the sky, functions as a kitchen, washing room, a dining room, a living room and a reception room. The shack is huddled with hundred other similar sheds along the narrow dirty alleys of the slum. The front door is covered by rust which has eaten its edges turning its color to a

reddish brown one. The shack provides the two with minimum protection. During the flood, rain trickles inside the single room and, to stop it, Youssef has to cover the roof with plastic bags. His mother also lines the inner sides of the bedroom with cardboard to keep out the humidity. At night Youssef cannot not sleep due to the sound of the rain falling and drumming the tin roof. The furniture also reveals their poverty. It consists of a few old and ragged items such as straw mats, cushions and blankets whose colors are fading.

To highlight the miserable and appalling poverty in which people in Hay An Najat live, Lalami juxtaposes the slum with the lavish and luxurious life in Anfa; the shanties of the slum are juxtaposed with the sumptuous villas and apartments of Anfa where the streets are paved and meet at sharp angles. Walking in those clean and paved streets, one can see “[t]ree branches overflowed from behind garden walls—lemon and orange trees, red hibiscus, and purple bougainvillea” (Lalami 2009, 65-6). The streets are quiet; instead of the sounds of cows and dogs in Hay An Najat, there are the sounds of water springs in the fountains. Children are heard laughing and calling out each other to jump into the swimming pools. Doormen are seen sweeping and cleaning the tiled sidewalks outside luxurious villas and apartment buildings or washing ostentatious and expensive cars parked in front of their splendid and magnificent mansion houses. In Anfa, there are no *hanouts* or small stores but rather giant supermarkets and shopping malls. And most importantly, there are no young men standing around or hanging out at street corners without work to do. Unlike Hay An Najat, Anfa neighborhood does not harbor any of the mysteries that one can find in Hay An Najat. The huge lacuna between the two spheres is symbolized by the birds flying: in Anfa, one can see falcons but in Hay An Najat only pigeons and sparrows. The falcons, symbols of power and dominance, stand for those who dwell in Anfa and hold the state power, and pigeons and sparrows, symbols of victimization and weakness, signify the downtrodden living in Hay An Najat.

Lalami gives the reader a complete picture of life in the slum of Casablanca. The picture includes different dimensions such as the physical characteristics of the slum including housing streets, trash and access to sanitary services and infrastructure, social characteristics which include poverty, family income, employment and injustice and inequality. The shacks do not meet the minimum standards of building regulations. Hence, the novel can be read as a critique of the corruption

and negligence of the Moroccan government and an expression of Lalami's frustration and disappointment with such corrupt authorities.

Morocco, like many other countries in the Middle East, has failed to develop industrial economics, advanced industries and more technological capacities. For this reason, many graduates find themselves without jobs. Due to poverty, Youssef has never felt happy in his life. He feels a huge resentment for his life and always dreams of a better living free of poverty, need and wretchedness. His dream is very simple: he just "wanted out of this miserable existence" (Lalami 2009, 221), to live another and better life in another and better world. To achieve this dream, he has to "find a steady job that would finally get his mother and him out of Hay An Najat" (Lalami 2009, 6). But this simple dream is beyond reach and is thwarted by numerous obstacles such as the corruption of the Moroccan authorities, unemployment and social inequality. He does his best to find a job. He applies for the police academy but, in spite of being a smart student, he fails in the exam. His failure is not due to his poor performance in the exam but rather due to the bribe that rich students pay to guarantee their admission: "many people paid a bribe to guarantee a passing grade" (Lalami 2009, 212). This is a blatant and clear example of how corruption is perpetrated by politicians themselves who are supposed to defend justice. Further, in his attempt to find a job, Youssef travels from one city to another. One day he goes to Rabat and applies for a job in the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After returning to Casablanca, he leaves an application at the National Office of Fisheries. Next, he reads two advertisements: one for a helper at a copy shop and the other for a receptionist at a café. When he calls, he is informed that both positions have been already filled. Youssef finds himself unable to survive in such a corrupt and unjust society. Hence, he thinks of migration hoping to find a place free of injustices. He pays a heavy fee to a scam lawyer to help him win in the lottery. Youssef's attempt to leave the country shows the connection between poverty and migration.

Here, the novel articulates the appalling challenges that face the Moroccan youth in finding a job. Lamenting the unemployment in the country, Lalami writes:

Youssef had come to believe that degrees did not matter. Smarter people than he, people with engineering or medical degrees, could not find jobs. They sat in the same cafés as the dropouts and the illiterates...everyone

Youssef knew, every single one of his friends...was jobless. (Lalami 2009, 210)

Education, which in other countries can guarantee a decent life, has no value in Morocco. The hope of the middle class to elevate their social status through education has failed them. It is this economic dilemma that faces youth not only in Morocco but also in the Arab world as a whole.

Youssef's dream of a happy life becomes almost reachable when he discovers that his father is alive and a wealthy businessman. This discovery widens his expectations. He feels confident that his father will help him get a new life. After the revelation that his father is alive and not dead, Youssef longs to meet him and hopes to circumvent the dead-end constraints that poverty and class have placed on him. He undertakes a journey looking for his father which culminates in finding him. To achieve material fulfillment, Youssef leaves Hay An Najat and crosses to the other side of the city of Casablanca. Youssef's decision implies giving up his mother and by leaving his mother and Hay An Najat, he is leaving the life of poverty and impoverishment. Though Youssef belongs to Hay An Najat, getting to know that he is the son of a wealthy man gives him hope to lead a better life and be part of Anfa.

Initially, his father, happy to see his only son, welcomes him and takes him under his wings. He changes Youssef's understanding of life and opens for him new horizons of expectations and hopes. Youssef's expectations are initiated by his father and strengthened by those around him. The emptiness and identity crisis that he has endured throughout his youth are now filled and the uncertain future appears certain: "Now there was a chance that the emptiness that had been the hallmark of his life could be filled. The future was uncertain, but at least he could see the glimmer of a future" (Lalami 2009, 115). Further, he feels confident that meeting his father, who promises him that he will prepare him for the new life, will give him "a chance to rewrite his life" (Lalami 2009, 124). Youssef is filled with hope by his father's promises. Embarrassed by life in Hay An Najat, he decides "not to look back on the past and should focus on the future" (Lalami 2009, 117) and, hence, starts distancing himself from anything that connects him to his old life. Encouraged by his father "to make a clean break" (Lalami 2009, 124) and to start fresh, he deserts his mother in favor of living a luxurious life that he has dreamt of for years and his old friends who have been "a part of his life, part of who he was"

(Ibid.). Experiencing a life of luxury and extravagance for the first time, and alienated by the new riches that his father gives him, Youssef assumes a new identity and breaks off all his life-long relationships with the closest people he lived within Hay An Najat.

There are two major frustrative situations in the novel that have led to Youssef's desperation. First, his inability to find a job and lead a decent life and second, being rejected by his father. In fact, Youssef's desperation is initiated in the first place by his father's rejection. Youssef's happy life does not last long. Just a few months later, a reversal of fortune takes place. Under the pressure of his brothers and wife, Nabil rejects his son and, consequently, Youssef is fired from his job in the Grand Hotel; the lock of the apartment is changed. All of a sudden he finds himself in the street with a few pieces of clothes in a pillowcase retrieved from his apartment by the doorman. In a single moment, Youssef, besides losing his father, loses his job, decent life, hope, optimism and expectations. His dreams are shattered and his hopes are dispelled. Anfa, for which he has been longing, turns to be hostile and riven by prejudices and hatred, and is marked by crude class divisions. Only after rejection, he realizes that the elite life in Morocco is unreachable. He is disappointed by his father whom he has "trusted...so much that he had forsaken everyone and everything for him, but now he had no friends, no degree, no job. Resentment and shame mixed afresh in his heart" (Lalami 2009, 213). When he goes back to Hay An Najat, he finds himself unable to adjust to his old lifestyle and neighborhood. Upon arriving, the "stench of burning garbage made it hard to repress the tears, and he let himself go" (Ibid.). Youssef's reversal of fortune, this time to the worse, initiates the collapse of his dreams and the beginning of his psychological drifting. As a result, he falls into a state of depression and frustration.

This loss has a striking psychological impact on him. After returning to Hay An Najat, he does not leave his bed for days. He just lies on his bed and stares at the ceiling, refusing to meet anyone. Depicting his condition, Lalami writes: "He just stared into space, lost in his thoughts. She [his mother] watched him: the faint lines along his cheeks, the ashen complexion, the slightly trembling hands. He was in such obvious pain" (Lalami 2009, 242). He stops shaving and feels 'safe' only in the bed. His condition deteriorates as he does "little but sleep or stare at the ceiling—counting the dips in the corrugated tin above him, and then counting them again until he fell asleep. He wanted never to wake up" (Lalami 2009, 195). Again, readers are told

that he spends his time “lying despondently on the divan...quiet, pensive, lost in a world she could not enter” (2009, 278). He does go to college or sit for his final exams. His mother tries to help and encourages him “that he would find his way someday, but he looked so distant that she doubted her words could penetrate his world” (Lalami 2009, 234). Miller and Stiver have successfully captured the extremity of isolation as they state:

We believe that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. This is not the same as being alone. It is a feeling that one is locked out of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation. In the extreme, psychological isolation can lead to a sense of hopelessness and desperation. People will do almost anything to escape this combination of condemned isolation and powerlessness. (quoted in Brown 2012, 140)

Due to his failure to find work and his rejection by his father, Youssef becomes highly susceptible to desperation. He has a sense of injustice as he finds his professional future so bleak and hampered by a lack of work opportunities:

For a while his life had seemed to open up, allowing him to see a path for himself, a future, but now the darkness was closing in again. He wanted out of this miserable existence. The pain was so acute that he could feel it, just under his ribs, with each breath he took. (Lalami 2009, 221)

The desperation that he feels makes him question the purpose of his existence: “He wanted to know why he was alive” (Lalami 2009, 243). He starts thinking of the purpose of his existence: “What purpose was there to his existence? If his mother had aborted him, he would have escaped the life that she had condemned herself to, and he would not have had to endure the fate that had been decided for him even before he was born” (Lalami 2009, 195). These questions allude to the close relation that can be found between desperation and existentialism. The prevailing emotion that readers can detect is the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.

Poverty breeds desperation and desperation breeds anger. Johnson (2005, 232) in his poem “Seven” writes: “Brother kills brother for a tiny crumb/ Desperation breeds anger and strife”. The struggle that Youssef experiences throughout his life, at the end, turns into anger. Being poor, illegitimate, rejected by father, without work, all this leads to anger. Youssef’s

anger took many shapes: sometimes it was soft and familiar, like a round stone that he had caressed for so long that it was perfectly smooth and polished; sometimes it was thin and sharp, like a blade that could slice through anything; sometimes it had the form of a star, radiating his hatred in all directions, leaving him numb and empty inside. (Lalami 2009, 195)

He is blinded by anger and “could not find the exit on his own and instead began to take each turn that presented itself without question” (Lalami 2009, 251). His anger is intensified by Hatim’s speeches and video displays: “The horror [of the videos] gave rise to fury, and suddenly Youssef felt unable to decide what to do with himself” (Lalami 2009, 253). Further, “Youssef had not thought there could be a way out of the labyrinth of words; his anger had imprisoned him there, but now Hatim was leading him to the exit” (Lalami 2009, 255). He has always seen such images that he watches in the videos played by Hatim, which usually stir “feelings of anger in Youssef. Today, though, the anger was already there, and the images merely sharpened it” (Lalami 2009, 252). Such horrors “gave rise to fury” (Lalami 2009, 253). Youssef’s anger is an emotional reaction to the pain he experiences, especially the pain of frustration.

Desperation is the evolutionary key to anger; that is, when people act on self-interest, the weak will always lose. Being unable to achieve one’s goals, breeds anger which can lead the weak to attack the strong. Youssef’s case shows that most people, under certain circumstances, are capable of anger and can redirect that anger at potential targets. Here it can be claimed that Youssef’s attack is an expression of anger. According to Sabini (1995, 411-428), there are two theories of anger. The first argues that anger is an emotional reaction to an offense or insult; the second argues that anger is an emotional reaction to pain of frustration. In this context, frustration is perceived as one’s failure to arrive at an expected destination or receive an expected reward. Any interpretation of frustration will, undoubtedly, include powerlessness and objective poverty as two major sources of frustration which might lead to anger.

Lalami’s novel emphasizes the role of hopelessness and helplessness in generating aggression and demonstrates that “desperation fuels terrorism” (Franklin 2012, 106); it is “but a single, lonely step from despair to terrorism” (Akbar 2003, par. 21). The lesser the feeling of hope, the greater the likelihood of despair and aggression. Trapped by such circumstances and limitations, he becomes an easy prey for Hatim’s Islamic group. Many factors have

contributed to drive him to make this tragic end. Surrounded by all these political, economic and social ills, Youssef is pushed to the extremes by circumstances beyond his control. The disillusionment that Youssef experiences with his father and the bleak future ahead weaken him and make him vulnerable to the lures of extremists. As has been demonstrated above, his decision to join terrorists is an act of ultimate despair; it is a horrific reaction to his father's rejection and the extremely inhumane conditions in which he lives.

Youssef's engagement in this rebellious behavior is motivated primarily by desperation, anger and revenge. In a state of hopelessness and rage he becomes susceptible to the lures of extremism. The suicidal mission is not an act of projecting power but rather an expression of weakness. However, the role that terrorist groups play in attracting youth to join them cannot be overlooked. Lalami has been highly successful in her exposition of the manipulative strategies used by terrorists. Hatim's terrorist organization, skilfully and through the use of media, manipulates facts and creates sophisticated impressions for Youssef and convinces him that such a violent act is heroic and valiant. To prepare Youssef for the mission, he is subjected to indoctrination by Hatim who represents the authoritative head of the group. Youssef is convinced from the start to undertake the mission, and of the just cause of the mission. Hatim's indoctrination sermons, which include religious, nationalist and even social themes, are intended to strengthen his motivation and to stop it from any expected dwindling. Religiously, Youssef is told that the Islamic teachings are lost in the society and it is his duty to reinstall them among the populace. God himself has chosen him for this mission. Nationally, Youssef is told that the state is corrupt and that it is the duty of everyone to stop this corruption. Socially, Youssef is reminded how he and his mother have been deserted by his father and it is his turn to avenge the wrong done to his mother. To sharpen Youssef's anger, and to familiarize killing, Hatim utilizes and manipulates Youssef's feeling by playing videotapes for Youssef.

Hatim's indoctrination sermons make references to God and Islam and the dominant message is to restore Islam. There are numerous references to sin, blasphemy, atheism, fornication, and so on. Muslims and Islam are in danger of being annihilated and overwhelmed by the Western. Hatim's mobilization, as his long speeches with Youssef demonstrate, includes a rhetoric of impending threat and a lurking evil enemy. And it is Youssef's duty to stop that evil. Action is required for

the defeat of evil and the triumph of the good. Moreover, Hatim's guiding principle is that society is corrupt and people do not follow the Islamic teachings and hence, the priority of bringing those people back to Islam is Youssef's responsibility. By using religion, Hatim has succeeded in transforming his personal revenge into a fundamentalist religious act of terrorism. It is through using religion that he is able to manipulate Youssef and others to carry out the mission.

Social learning theory, developed by Bandura, proposes that human behavior is learned through mimicking or observing others. Regarding terrorism, Bandura (1990; 2004) emphasizes that an individual's socialization within terrorist groups and organizations, undoubtedly, facilitates the use of violence through learning and imitation. Bandura states that individuals normally internalize moral standards and social norms which guide their behavior and restrain their violent acts. Terrorists are socialized by fundamentalist groups and taught to disengage from such moral codes. One of the mechanisms used to teach terrorists how to internalize terrorist acts is through reframing the moral meaning of the terrorist action. They are taught that their violence is justified and morally defensible; hence certain feelings of patriotism and injustice or ideological rhetoric are invoked. In other words, the terrorist act is reframed as morally and religiously legitimate. Hatim explains the terrorist action as an act to defend Islam and a defensive reaction to the attempts of the West to eliminate Islam and control the Muslim world.

Besides desperation, revenge can be another motivation for violence. Dzikansky et al. (2012, 44) argue that many violent acts such as terrorist attacks "are driven by personal motivations. They may be avenging individual grievances...An individual may feel 'desperate' due to extreme poverty; another may commit it as an act of revenge". Randy Borum opines that a "desire for revenge or vengeance is a common response to redress or remediate a wrong of injustice inflicted on another" (Folorunso 2013, 65). Borum argues that "one of the strongest motivations behind terrorism is vengeance, particularly the desire to avenge not oneself but others. Vengeance can be specific or diffuse, but it is an obsessive drive that is a powerful motive for violence toward others, especially people thought to be responsible for injustices" (Crenshaw 1992, 73). Further, perceptions of injustice might be viewed as grievances that Ross (1993, 326) argued as one of the most crucial precipitant causes of terrorism. He further proposes that grievances may be political, economic, racial, ethnic, social or

religious. In *Secret Son*, Youssef agrees to kill Benaboud to avenge the wrongs done to him and his mother. Towards the end of the novel, after he joins Hatim's group, he understands that his mission is to avenge the wrongs done to his mother:

Not long ago, he [Youssef] had asked his mother why she had not aborted him, why he was alive. Now it seemed to him he had finally found the answer to that question: to stand up to all those who had wronged her. This, at last, was the purpose of his existence. (Lalami 2009, 256)

Hence, he makes up his mind to take revenge: "He would do this for her—for all those who were victims of people like his father" (Lalami 2009, 258-259).

According to Bahadur (2009, par.6), *Secret Son* "is a nuanced depiction of the roots of Islamic terrorism, written by someone who intimately knows one of the stratified societies where it grows". Bahadur (2009, par. 2) adds that the novel "explores the dysfunctional politics and dispossessed psyches that allow militant Islamists to win easy converts in a Casablanca slum, where every day the government fails its people". In this novel, the author suggests that terrorist attacks are not motivated by a single motive; different terrorists have different reasons and most of the time terrorist acts are driven by a combination of reasons. Further, she suggests that there is a close relationship between poverty, desperation and terrorism. That is, economic determination plays a critical role in triggering acts of terrorism and, hence, one way to save youth and prevent terrorist acts is by providing youth with work opportunities and economic stability. The novel demonstrates that religion is not the sole motivation of terrorism; rather it suggests that that terrorism does have a socioeconomic dimension. Throughout the novel, poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities and inequality are seen as effective fertilizers for terrorism. In this case, the best way to end terrorism is to fight impoverishment and injustice and create more jobs for graduates and foster economic developments through which authorities can fight poverty and restore hope among youth.

The circumstances in which Youssef lives increase the potential for him to join terrorist groups. As a young man, he is unable to find a job to help him survive. There is a complete absence of the authorities whose duty is to support youth in this critical moment of their lives. He finds himself fighting his way alone; the future ahead is so bleak with no hope of a prosperous life ahead. His opportunities for advancement

are practically nonexistent; suddenly he finds himself falling in the hands of an exploitative fundamentalist group which exploits his need and despair. Youssef commits this terrorist act as a rejection of the dominant state corruption as well as an expression of despair and helplessness. Youssef, who lacks economic opportunities, becomes resentful about his socioeconomic status. His seething resentment is exacerbated not only by the growing living gaps among the poor and the rich but also by his father's rejection. He feels that he has been unfairly deprived of his rights either in getting a job or receiving his share of inheritance. Fuelled by desperation and due to relative deprivation Youssef then takes revenge. In other words, his terrorist act serves as a means to voice his sadness and discontent over deprivation and exclusion.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that being a terrorist does not happen over a night. It is the result of a long process of frustration, alienation, marginalization and ostracism and lack of opportunities, anger and then protest before they eventually turn to terrorisms. This process takes place not in isolation but within a larger political and socio-economic environment involving the state, the government, the family and the extremist group. In this sense, *Secret Son* highlights the conditions for the emergence of religious fundamentalism and radicalism in Morocco. Understanding all these variables and their interaction can explain why some individuals turn to violence. Throughout the novel, there is nothing that shows that Youssef is committing this act solely to please God or for the sake of Islam. Besides, there is a personal purpose behind his behavior which is neither religious nor communal. He feels that some wrongs have been done to him and he is going to redress them through aggression.

As a political discourse, Lalami's *Secret Son* is committed to the exploration of the penurious people in Morocco bringing to light the suffering of the ordinary man and the wide lacuna that separates the rich and the poor. It also demonstrates how authorities, unknowingly, may facilitate youth vulnerability and victimization by fundamentalists. It exposes Morocco's incapability to make long term plans to improve the economic sector in the country and create or invent an enabling environment for economic development. Morocco, the novel suggests, is guilty of producing a lagging economy through parasitic and corrupt individuals. This pervasive corruption has a

negatively profound impact on Moroccans. Lalami sees this economic failure as a product of an impotent leadership and uncommitted government and self-interested politicians.

For Lalami, those concerned with terrorism have to look a little beyond media accounts and ideological reports which attempt to shield the truth. If a true understanding of terrorism is to be achieved, a new detached outlook is necessary. By this ‘true understanding’ I mean to understand its sources, where it comes from and how it develops and why people are attracted to it. This understanding may help in drying up its sources. In other words, identifying the causes of terrorism will help comprehend the pathway toward terrorism which, in turn, will help in identifying and preventing individuals’ engagement in terrorist acts.

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