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RECLAMING THE NARRATIVE OF THE EAST: A CRITIQUE OF ORIENTALISM IN ALIF THE UNSEEN (2012) AND HOPE AND OTHER DANGEROUS PURSUITS (2005)

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how contemporary Muslim literature challenges and reconstructs orientalist narratives that shape global perceptions of Islam. Focusing on *Alif the Unseen* by G. Willow Wilson and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* by Laila Lalami, this study aims to analyze how these works represent Muslim identities beyond stereotypical constructions. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study employs the frameworks of Orientalism, representation, and intersectionality to explore narrative strategies and character construction. The research findings reveal that both novels actively counter Orientalist discourses by presenting Muslim characters as complex, aggressive, and shaped by intersecting social, political, and cultural factors. Instead of reinforcing the binary opposition between East and West, both novels construct alternative representations that emphasize hybridity, roles, and life experiences. These narratives position Muslim subjects as active producers of meaning, rather than passive objects of representation. In conclusion, contemporary Muslim literature functions as a form of resistance to the dominant Western discourse and offers more nuanced and humanizing depictions of Muslim identity in a global context.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Islamophobia, Muslim Representation, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Literature, Counter-Narrative, G. Willow Wilson, Laila Lalami.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana sastra Muslim kontemporer menantang dan merekonstruksi narasi-narasi orientalis yang membentuk persepsi global terhadap Islam. Dengan berfokus pada *Alif the Unseen* karya G. Willow Wilson dan *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* karya Laila Lalami, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana karya-karya tersebut merepresentasikan identitas Muslim di luar konstruksi stereotip. Melalui analisis tekstual kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka Orientalisme, representasi, dan interseksionalitas untuk mengeksplorasi strategi naratif serta konstruksi karakter. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa kedua novel tersebut secara aktif melawan wacana Orientalis dengan menghadirkan tokoh-tokoh Muslim sebagai sosok yang kompleks, agresif, dan dibentuk oleh faktor-faktor sosial, politik, dan budaya yang saling bersinggungan. Alih-alih memperkuat oposisi biner antara Timur dan Barat, kedua novel tersebut membangun representasi alternatif yang menekankan hibriditas, peran, dan pengalaman hidup. Narasi-narasi ini memposisikan subjek Muslim sebagai produsen makna yang aktif, bukan sekadar objek representasi yang pasif. Sebagai kesimpulan, sastra Muslim kontemporer berfungsi sebagai bentuk perlawanan terhadap wacana Barat yang dominan dan menawarkan penggambaran identitas Muslim yang lebih bernuansa dan memanusiakan dalam konteks global.

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Kata Kunci: *Orientalisme, Islamofobia, Representasi Muslim, Interseksionalitas, Sastra Pascakolonial, Narasi Tandingan, G. Willow Wilson, Laila Lalami.*

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, discussions on Islamophobia and the image of Muslims have become increasingly urgent not only in the political and social spheres, but also in cultural and literary studies. Representations of Muslims in Western media post-9/11 are often characterized by fear, stereotypes, and labeling that lead to the formation of a "dangerous Muslim" or "exotic Eastern" identity. or Muslims are frequently portrayed as outsiders who struggle to adapt to Europe's secular and liberal values, and this narrative strongly influences public attitudes as well as government policy-making (Pradana, 2025, p.85). As mentioned by Khan, Zin, and Fakhruddin argue that media narratives continuously construct Muslims as cultural outsiders and security threats (2024, p.). This phenomenon is not simply the result of ideological tensions between Islam and the West, but rather a reflection of the long legacy of orientalism that still lives on in new forms through movies, news, and even modern literary texts. As According to Battenfeld, orientalism has transformed into cultural Islamophobia, influencing how Muslim identity is imagined and circulated globally (2025, p.14). In other words, orientalism no longer just produces questions about the colonial past, but rather structures of thought that are still at work in contemporary global consciousness.

The urgency of this issue is reflected in the increasing discrimination and violence faced by Muslim communities across Western countries. Studies have shown that Muslim women, particularly those wearing the hijab, are frequently subjected to verbal harassment and physical assaults in public spaces, while state policies in countries such as France continue to impose restrictions on religious dress that disproportionately affect Muslim women and limit their religious freedom (Babacan, 2023, p.). In the North American context, Adetry and Burhanuddin emphasize that Islamophobia represents not only a social response but also a continuation of orientalist ideology that shapes Western perceptions of the Islamic world (2024, p.5). In addition, in A Systematic Literature Review of Islamophobia on Media: Trends, Factors, and Stereotypes states that a more systematically focused literature review

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on the media found the same mechanism, namely the role of negative coverage, structural bias, and lack of religious understanding that reinforces anti-Muslim stereotypes: Tama and Sulistyaningrum identify negative representation, structural biases, and limited knowledge about Islam as major contributors to Islamophobia (2023, p.13). This condition shows that the struggle against Islamophobia is not just a politics of representation, but also an effort to free epistemology from colonial hegemony that continues to live in the discourse of modernity. As in the study Media and Islamophobia in Europe: A Literature-Based Analysis of Reports 2015-2023 found that in Western Europe there is a paradox between advocacy for diversity and the realities shaped by political and global dynamics: Ramadhan et al., highlight a contradiction between Europe's claims of promoting diversity and the political realities that restrict it (2025, p.).

These facts show that Islamophobia is not just a social issue, but an epistemic issue of how the world produces knowledge and images about Islam. Vinten Robet describe epistemic Islamophobia as an injustice embedded in the processes of producing and validating knowledge about Muslims (2025, p.418). Therefore, it is important for literary research to examine how works of fiction are able to challenge these constructions of knowledge, especially when written by Muslim authors themselves who live in the intersection of global culture and politics. In the field of literary studies, the narrative of "the Orient" has long been a field of ideological debate. Since Edward Said published Orientalism, many scholars have examined how literary representations shape power relations between the West and the East. However, as Khan et al., also observe that Muslims continue to be portrayed as cultural outsiders and threats, extending the orientalist legacy (2025, p.287). Furthermore, most of the early studies were dominated by readings of Western texts. Now, a new generation of Muslim writers has emerged who are no longer objects of representation, but subjects who represent themselves. Through their works, they challenge orientalist logic and open up space to interpret Islamic identity in a complex, fluid and hybrid way.

While many studies address Islamophobia and orientalism in Western media, there are limited literary studies that deeply examine how Muslim writers themselves reverse these orientalist narratives. The majority of studies stop at the descriptive level of detecting bias or

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stereotypes without highlighting the narrative and ideological strategies Muslim writers use to destabilize these images. Whereas, emphasize that academia plays a central role in critically dismantling biased structures of knowledge (Bhambra et al., 2020, p.). That academic knowledge production is itself an arena where Islamophobia can be reproduced or challenged directly binds claims about epistemic dimensions. This is where this research stands, reading Muslim literary works as a form of epistemic resistance to the dominance of Western discourse. This issue has a strong empirical basis. While a Pew Research Center report highlights a "trust deficit" towards Muslims in the West, with more than 50% of respondents in France and Germany still associating Islam with violence" (Mohamed, 2021, p.12). Furthermore, an analysis based on regional reports shows a structural paradox: although the EU and many Western countries claim to support diversity, Islamophobia reports (2015-2023) show how migration policies, media propaganda, and populist political narratives continue to produce inequality, a "paradox between Europe's advocacy for diversity and the realities shaped by political and global dynamics" (Ramadhan et al., 2025, p.583). This fact shows that negative narratives about Islam are still part of modern cultural consciousness. Literature, as a cultural product, can be a counter-narrative space that changes the way the world understands Islam not as a threat, but as a diverse and humane identity. Also Contemporary Muslim literature serves as a critical space for resisting epistemic domination, inverting Western fears of the East and reclaiming agency in global discourse. (Kumar, 2021, p.22). This lacuna is an important basis for this research, because both G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* and Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* present Muslim narratives from an inside perspective not as objects, but subjects who actively shape discourse. Thus, this research seeks to complement the study of orientalism by presenting a more intersectional and representational reading.

The two works analyzed in this study *Alif the Unseen* (2012) by G. Willow Wilson and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) by Laila Lalami illustrate the tension between the Islamic world and global modernity. Alif the Unseen features a young Arab hacker who lives under an authoritarian regime and must negotiate between technology, spirituality, and Muslim identity. Through the confluence of the digital world and the genie

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world, Wilson combines political reality with Eastern mythology, creating an allegory about the struggle against epistemic control and Western hegemony. As for the representation of authoritarian regimes, digital censorship, and urban spaces of the Middle East post-Arab Spring, Wilson wants to show that modern Muslim identity cannot be separated from the dynamics of technology, the politics of surveillance, and the existence of a global diaspora. Meanwhile, Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits presents the story of Moroccan immigrants who try to cross into Spain for a better life. The novel clearly traces the postcolonial experience, which is still riddled with historical trauma, class inequality, and the aspirations of the younger generation to break out of the cycle of economic and political domination, as well as the exoticization of the Orient that is still maintained in the European imagination. Both novels represent post-imperial anxiety and resistance to orientalist constructions of Muslims as "inferior."

On the other hand, the theoretical context of orientalism has undergone important developments since Edward Said introduced the concept in 1978. Critiques of orientalism now focus not only on how the West creates images of the East, but also how Muslim subjects can reclaim representational agency through cultural practices including literature. Stuart Hall's theory of representation extends the understanding that meaning is never stable, it is negotiated, produced and contested continuously. Meanwhile, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality shows that Muslim identity is not just a homogeneous category, but is formed through the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, colonial history, and geopolitical conditions.

By considering these historical, political, and theoretical contexts. This study aims to analyze how the novels *Alif the Unseen* and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* challenge and invert traditional orientalist narratives through narrative strategies and character representations. This study aims to explore how contemporary Muslim literature becomes a field of critique against epistemic domination and anti-imperial anxieties rooted in East-West relations. As such, this study focuses not only on analyzing texts, but also on how these texts play a role in articulating forms of resistance, agency, and transformation of Muslim identity in the global era, as well as to situate contemporary Muslim literature as a space for the

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production of a counter-discourse of a form of epistemic resistance that challenges, disrupts, and redefines the way the world understands Islam and the East.

DISCUSSION

As a first step towards a deeper understanding of how contemporary Muslim literature challenges orientalist discourse, this section discusses the findings and interpretations based on three main theoretical frameworks: Edward Said's Orientalism, Stuart Hall's Representation, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality. Through these three, the analysis of G. Willow Wilson's Alif the Unseen and Laila Lalami's Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits shows how these two novels overturn the stereotypes of the East constructed by Western views and present complex, layered, and empowered forms of identity. Right-wing populist groups often employ rhetoric that frames Muslims as outsiders in order to gain political advantage during elections (Pradana, 2025, p.84).

G. Willow Wilson's novel *Alif the Unseen* challenges Orientalist constructs that portray the East as irrational, passive, and dependent on Western authority. Rather than merely describing a contemporary Muslim background, the novel constructs a form of narrative resistance in which the East is reimagined as an active and self-determined subject. This shift is significant within the framework of Orientalism, as it disrupts the traditional hierarchy that prioritizes Western knowledge over Eastern experience. Through this representation, the novel reimagines Muslim identity as dynamic, critical, and capable of negotiating with global power structures. The first quote emphasizes this form of resistance to Western domination explicitly:

> *"No. No way. I don't want foreigners involved in my business. Djinn are one thing, but I draw the line at Americans"* (Wilson, 2012, p.120).

Alif's statement rejects American involvement as a symbol of Western power that often imposes its values on the Eastern world. In terms of Orientalism, this reflects a postcolonial awareness of "epistemic domination," in which the West serves as the organizer of narratives about modernity and progress. Djohar notes that colonial thinking continues to

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manifest in racist attitudes that label others as foreign and inferior (2024, p.103). Alif's rejection signifies a reversal of position: The East is no longer a determined object, but a subject that determines the limits of Western cultural and political intervention. Through Stuart Hall's representation lens, this scene shows that the meaning of "modernity" is no longer monopolized by the West. Hall explains that representation functions as a process of generating meaning through language rather than simply reflecting reality (1997, p.25) and in this context, Alif's language of rejection becomes a symbolic act to represent the East that is independent and has authority over itself. Furthermore, Wilson extends his critique through narratives about literacy and political censorship:

> *"The censors don't bother with fantasy books, especially old ones. They can't understand them. They think it's all kids' stuff. They'd die if they knew what The Chronicles of Narnia were really about."* (Wilson, 2012, p.91).

These findings open up a space for reading representations of ideas and freedom of thought in Eastern societies. Instead of portraying the Islamic world as underdeveloped or dogmatic as it is often constructed in orientalist discourse By producing alternative narratives, Muslim literature dismantles epistemic domination, addressing the ingrained anti-empire tensions that define East-West interactions (Kumar, 2021, p.35). Wilson presents a society that is aware of the power of language and symbols. In Hall's framework, the text shows how meaning is produced and negotiated through popular culture and literature. Stuart Hall gives the meaning to things by representing them, the words used about them, the stories told about them, the images generated, the emotions associated with them, the ways classify and conceptualize them, the values attached to them (1997, p.7). Thus, Wilson rejects the binary representation of the East as the "other" and the West as the center of rationality.

In Kimberlé Crenshaw's dimension of intersectionality, the characters' experiences cannot be understood solely from the perspective of Eastern or Western culture, but from the intersection of identity factors such as class, religion, and gender. The concept of intersectionality describes how categories such as race, class, and gender intersect to shape

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real-life experiences and systems of power (1989, p.166). The character of Intisar is a prime example:

> *"Intisar intruded on their conversation like an elegant reproach, sometimes to defend the emir, sometimes to add new levels of complexity to their critique"* (Wilson, 2012, p.28).

Intisar represents a Muslim woman who is educated, critical, and active in intellectual discourse. In Crenshaw's context, she is at the crossroads of identity she is female, Muslim, and of high social class, thus having a unique position in a patriarchal and postcolonial socio-political system. By presenting intellectually empowered women, Wilson challenges the orientalist construction of Eastern women as passive or exotic beings rather than Wadud points out that dominant interpretive frameworks of religious texts have historically prioritized male experience, marginalizing others (2021, p.2). An intersectional perspective, along with examining how political parties interact with their members, is crucial for understanding ongoing systemic inequalities within British politics. These representations emphasize that Muslim women's experiences are not singular, but rather the result of the interaction between gender, power, and cultural context. Another aspect of intersectionality emerges through the representation of technology in modern Islamic society:

> *"An Internet where every blog, every chat room, every forum is monitored for illegal expressions of distress and discontent"* (Wilson, 2012, p.21).

This description reveals the reality that Eastern life is not only shaped by tradition, but also by global political and technological forces. Here, Wilson illustrates how the identity of modern Muslim individuals like Alif exists at the crossroads between spirituality and digitalization, between freedom and surveillance. In Crenshaw's framework, this suggests a new form of interconnectedness between the social, political and economic factors that shape experiences of oppression and resistance. One of the key insights of intersectional analysis is that societal structures organized around categories like gender, race, sexuality, and class result in different forms of oppression and privilege for individuals located at their intersections (1989, p.1459). Alif as a hybrid and intersectional character represents a new

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generation of Muslims who are able to navigate two worlds: local and global. Through a combination of theories of orientalism, representation, and intersectionality, Alif the Unseen succeeds in presenting the East not as a static "other", but as a dynamic, empowered, and negotiated space of meaning. Wilson rebrands the Muslim world as a more humanized and complex place where modernity, tradition, and gender meet and influence each other.

Laila Lalami in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* continues the deconstruction of orientalist discourse by presenting Moroccan Muslim characters who are diverse, layered, and have agency in dealing with social, economic, and political realities. Through various perspectives, Lalami reverses the classic stereotypes that portray Easterners, especially women and Muslim societies, as weak, static, or exotic in the eyes of the West. Within the framework of Edward Said's Orientalism, the novel functions as a form of resistance to the Western construction that Said asserts that dominant cultures define themselves by constructing an imagined inferior "Other" as a point of contrast (1979, p.45). Lalami presents an alternative narrative where Eastern subjects speak for themselves, rather than simply being objects of observation. The following quote shows one of these forms of resistance:

> *"Halima's gaze is direct, not shifty like Faten's. She has an aura of quiet determination about her, and it stirs feelings of respect in Murad, even though he thinks her irresponsible, or at least foolish, for risking her children's lives on a trip like this."* (Lalami, 2005, p.6).

Halima is explicitly portrayed with a "gaze that is direct" and "quiet determination," two expressions that challenge the image of Muslim women in the classic orientalist view as oppressed, passive, and submissive. Djohar argues that Lalami's novel demonstrates how state authorities participate in gender-based and political violence against women and migrants (2024, p.112). Lalami's novel critiques the use of state power to uphold patriarchal norms and perpetrate injustices against marginalized women and immigrants. Through Stuart Hall's representation perspective, Halima's description produces new meanings of strong and autonomous Eastern women. Kumar explains that Islamophobia is driven by historical anxieties related to East-West power dynamics, which Muslim writers challenge by showing

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that such fears are socially constructed (2021, p.28). These representations reject established systems of meaning in colonial discourse and open up new spaces for more humane and diverse interpretations.

When viewed through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, Halima's experience shows how gender, social class and economic conditions intersect in determining her position. As a poor woman who takes risks for her children, Halima is at the intersection of economic struggle and patriarchal expectations. Her identity cannot be reduced to the category of "Muslim woman," but is the result of a complex interaction between social structures and personal choices. Islamophobia has shifted from a fringe sentiment to a normalized component of political and civic systems in several European countries (1989, p.45). The orientalist reversal is also evident in the following quote:

> *"'So he knew Morocco pretty well, then.' 'Better than the Moroccans themselves.'"* (Lalami, 2005, p.182).

This dialog parodies the West's claim to "knowledge of the East." In Orientalism, Said highlights that the West often positions itself as the authority in defining the East. However, through the irony of this sentence, Lalami reverses the narrative by showing the absurdity of such claims. The writer Djohar also states that Muslim communities link memories of past oppression to contemporary experiences under authoritarian regimes (2024, p.156). In Hall's representation perspective, this scene produces counter-meanings to the epistemic stereotype that understanding a culture cannot be separated from the position of power and discourse relations. Also According to Wadud, patriarchy operates as a system of privilege that centers cisgender men and subordinates other gender identities, including women (2021, p.3). Thus, Western knowledge of the East here is not a form of superiority, but a symbol of colonization of questionable meanings. In addition, Lalami subtly highlights how Eastern identities are exoticized by Western views:

> *"'And did you wear those embroidered dresses? What are they called? Caftans?' 'Not really.' He seemed disappointed..."* (Lalami, 2005, p.139).

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This scene illustrates how Western characters form expectations of the "uniqueness of the East," which is seen as something beautiful and foreign. When these expectations are not met, a sense of disappointment arises, showing that the West's fascination with the East is often superficial and aesthetic. Said explains that orientalism operates through the desire to "possess" and 'know' the Orient, not to understand it. Also Kumar contends that Western media and literature continue to reproduce Orientalist representations that legitimize imperial authority, whereas contemporary Muslim writers counter these narratives through decolonial literary strategies (2021, p.27). In this context, Lalami shows how representations of Eastern women are commodified through external views that do not recognize their individual complexity. This critique of exoticization is reinforced by Murad's portrayal, which notices the behavior of foreign tourists:

> *"He couldn't understand these foreigners. They could go to a nice hotel, have a clean bed... and here they were in the worst part of town, looking around for something exotic."* (Lalami, 2005, p.113).

This quote reveals the narrative's awareness of the Oriental gaze's dynamics of alienation and suffering as cultural consumption. Kumar also asserts that Islamophobia operates as a mode of epistemic domination, framing Muslims as inherent threats and fueling long-standing anxieties embedded in East–West relations (2021, p.10). In Hall's framework, this representation rejects the position of the West as a neutral observer and places it as part of a system of meanings that can also be criticized. Lalami creates a counter-representation in which the Eastern subject becomes the observer of Western behavior, reversing the direction of the traditional orientalist view. further:

> *"Little did they know that we'd be back, Murad thinks. only instead of a fleet, here we are in an inflatable boat… not just Moors, but a motley mix of people from the ex-colonies, without guns or armor, without a charismatic leader"* (Lalami, 2005, p.3).

These representations emphasize that Muslim women's experiences are never singular, but are shaped by an intertwining confluence of factors such as class, gender,

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religion, and political conditions. In the context of this excerpt, Murad's bittersweet humor from "fleet" to "rubber boat" critiques the colonial imagination. Colonial representations envision Muslims as aggressors, but reality shows that they are victims of economic injustice and colonial history. In Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, these connections show how social, economic and political structures work in tandem to create complex forms of oppression and spaces of resistance. Power hierarchies shape which forms of difference are treated as politically significant, as they emerge through intersecting structural forces (1989, p.155). At the same time, Western knowledge of the East is not a sign of superiority, but a form of colonization of meaning that continues to be questioned in contemporary studies. Salem argues that viewing intersectionality as a traveling theory enables broader and more contextual critiques across diverse settings (2018, p.404). Therefore, when there is a sense of disillusionment with the West's aesthetic and superficial view of the East, it underscores the critique that such interest is often not accompanied by a substantive understanding of the complexities of Muslim identity and experience. The intersectionality dimension becomes more apparent in Faten's story, especially when Lalami mentions his family history:

> *"Hearing the Generalissimo's name stirred in Faten memories about her maternal grandfather, a proud Rifi who'd lost his eyesight during the rebellion in the north. It was mustard gas."* (Lalami, 2005, p.137).

Through this passage, Lalami links individual identity to colonial history and class struggle. Faten is not merely a female figure in a patriarchal society, but also a bearer of colonial trauma involving race, politics, and military power. Salem also critiques the tendency of liberal feminist frameworks to adopt intersectionality while neglecting the roles of race, class, and other social divisions among women (2018, p.407). In Crenshaw's theory, Faten's experience is a clear example of how various forms of oppression based on gender, ethnicity, and colonial history intersect to form a complex identity. Similarly, in the chapter "The Fanatic," a debate arises regarding the use of the hijab between Noura and her father, Larbi. Noura sees the hijab as a form of protection from harassment on the streets:

> *"Women are harassed on the streets in Rabat all the time. The hijab is a protection."*

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(Lalami, 2005, p.36)

These gender issues regarding women's vulnerability to harassment intersect with religious identity as a means of navigating unsafe public spaces. The interplay of gender and religious identity in this context further adds to the complexity of sociopolitical navigation. For Noura, the hijab serves as a "shield" in masculine and unsafe public spaces. This choice is often misunderstood from a Western perspective as a form of submission (Idrissi, 2025, p.15). However, within the context of intersectionality, it represents a conscious effort to minimize the risk of gender-based oppression on the streets of Rabat. Lalami, in this regard, demonstrates that religious identity can be used tactically to reclaim a sense of security that the state or social structures have failed to provide. Likewise, the concerns Halima expresses in the sentence below clearly indicate the pressures she faces regarding gender, social class, and the circumstances she finds herself in:

> *"I could have been her, had my luck been different, had I gone to a real school, had I married someone else."* (Lalami, 2005, p.75)

This sentence highlights how social class and gender, particularly in the context of marriage, each play a crucial role in determining a person's fate. Halima's reflection here debunks the myth by highlighting how a person's fate is shaped and molded as much as possible by social structures, not merely by individual effort. Social class in access to education and gender in marriage can determine a person's position within the social hierarchy. This demonstrates that an individual's fate is not solely determined by personal effort but is influenced by broader social structures, where education and marriage play a role in reproducing social inequality (Hikmat, 2024; Maqsood et al., 2025). Halima realizes that her identity as a lower-class woman makes her highly vulnerable. A single wrong decision regarding marriage or the absence of a diploma from a "decent school" can plunge someone into permanent poverty. This awareness demonstrates that, within the framework of intersectionality, economic oppression never stands alone but is always accompanied by the limited access experienced by women within a rigid patriarchal system. Furthermore, another form of intersectionality highlighted in the text below also reveals discrimination against

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Aziz, a foreign immigrant, which makes him a target of surveillance even while he is engaged in ordinary activities:

> *"But he didn't talk about the time when he was in El Corte Ingles shopping for a jacket and the guard followed him around as if he were a criminal."* (Lalami, 2005, p.162)

This illustrates another form of intersectionality that Aziz experiences, how race and immigrant status, combined with social class, can trigger suspicions of criminality in the host country. Even though Aziz is in a public space, his racial identity and immigrant status automatically trigger a "criminal" stigma in the eyes of local authorities. The surveillance carried out by the store clerk is a form of subtle discrimination that reinforces the notion that Aziz is still viewed as a threatening "other." This demonstrates that resistance to Orientalism cannot be separated from an intersectional understanding of how power operates at various levels. Lalami reveals that postcolonial Muslim identity is not merely a reaction to the West, but rather the result of a dynamic interaction between history, gender, and culture. This novel rejects the binary opposition between East and West by presenting universal human experiences that remain rooted in local contexts.

Overall, both *Alif the Unseen* and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* effectively challenge traditional orientalist narratives by presenting active, critical and empowered representations of the East. Pradana maintains that Islamophobia functions as a political discourse that legitimizes exclusion in the name of protecting cultural values and national security (2025, p.12). Through the theories of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, it can be seen that the narrative strategies and character constructions in these two works not only reverse colonial stereotypes, but also emphasize the complex diversity of modern Muslim identities. As such, they function as a form of cultural resistance to Western epistemic domination and open up new spaces for more equal cross-cultural interpretations. The two novels *Alif the Unseen* by G. Willow Wilson and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* by Laila Lalami, although different in terms of genre, setting, and storytelling strategy, both function as counter-discourses to the orientalist constructions that have taken

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root in global representations of Muslims. The mainstream media has frequently portrayed Islam in connection with violence, extremism, and cultural backwardness, reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Said, 1979, p.10). Through critical comparison, it can be seen that the two authors use different but parallel approaches in dismantling hegemonic patterns of representation, asserting Muslim agency, and disrupting the epistemic assumptions attached to the Western view of the Islamic world.

Thematically, *Alif the Unseen* operates in a futuristic-fantastic realm that combines technology, spirituality and mythology as a form of symbolic resistance to imperial control and modern authoritarianism. The character Alif manifests an urban Muslim figure who lives at the intersection of the digital world, state power, and religious identity. His resistance is digital, epistemic and spiritual, showing that modernity does not have to be synonymous with the West. In doing so, Wilson not only challenges orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as "traditional" or "anti-modernity," but also affirms the intellectual capacity of Muslim subjects to navigate the contemporary technological world. In contrast, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* operates on a social realism that reflects economic inequality, transnational mobility, and lingering colonial trauma in postcolonial Morocco. Lalami accentuates the human experience of migrants, women and the working class living within unequal global power structures. Resistance in the novel is social, political and historical. The characters do not fight against algorithms or digital surveillance, but against poverty, patriarchy and the legacy of European colonialism. As such, Lalami presents a form of agency that is embedded in everyday experience, showing that the complexities of Muslim identity are also born out of multi-layered material and historical conditions.

CONCLUSION

This research critically demonstrates that contemporary Muslim literature acts as a form of epistemic resistance to the legacy of orientalism that is still entrenched in global discourse. Through the analysis of these two works, the research found that both authors succeeded in reversing Western stereotypes of Muslims as irrational, exotic, and inferior. The characters are portrayed as empowered, reflective, and have intersectional identities that

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reject the East-West dichotomy. The findings confirm that Muslim narratives not only criticize Islamophobic and colonial representations, but also form a new understanding of dynamic, autonomous, and plural Muslim subjectivities. This research contributes to postcolonial literary studies by positioning Muslim writers as counter-discourse producers who reclaim the right to define their identity and knowledge within a global cultural framework. This research can serve as an initial exploration of similar counter-narratives in Muslim or other diasporic literary works to see how transnational identities continue to challenge power structures and global cultural stereotypes. Academics, critics, and cultural institutions are expected to be more active in appreciating and studying the works of Muslim writers as critical interventions that play a role in decolonizing knowledge and building a more equal cross-cultural dialogues.

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