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## Stranding in the “Promised Land” Female Perspectives and Perspectives on Females within *Hispano-Moroccan* Literature

Abstract

The prize-awarded novel *L'últim patriarca* (2008) by Catalano-Moroccan writer Najat El Hachmi deals with dethroning the last patriarch of the narrator's family: her father. While scholars have repeatedly read this work by following El Hachmi's autobiographical traces, I wish instead to examine it regarding how a female author writes about her (or more generally expressed: about a female's) situation 'after' migration. By this, I want to add to this volume's issue both a literary perspective and a literary sociological approach, examining the ambivalent situation of the female protagonist after having moved to Catalonia and combining it with the analysis of the text's innovatory narrative strategies and techniques and thus underlining its literary potential.

### 1. Introduction

Reflecting on the still little-known *Hispano-Moroccan* literature<sup>1</sup> necessarily includes reflecting on texts written by female authors and on

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term '*Hispano-Moroccan* literature' (as well as the broader notion of '*Hispano-Maghrebian* literature') will typographically be marked in italics, indicating that this expression is not unanimously used in the academic discourse on this fiction and that it is partially considered critically, especially by Maghrebian scholars, because of its proximity to the historical formula of '*Hispano-Arab brotherhood*' ('*hermandad hispano-árabe*', see e.g., Abrighach 2013: 282), a term instrumentalized during the fascist Franco regime to insinuate a cultural and political proximity between Spain and Arab countries. Though, instead of describing this literary phenomenon as 'Moroccan literature in Spanish' or even 'Moroccan literature of Castilian expression', as some scholars suggest (referring to this debate, see e.g., Chakor/Macías 1996; Gahete et al.

texts that put female subjects in the foreground, for those works constitute a large and essential part of the literature located between the Maghreb and Spain, between the African and European continents and between their often mutually influenced historical trajectories. And so, it is hardly surprising that the work of a *Hispano-Moroccan* author that so far received the most attention is a novel written by a woman: the prize-awarded book *L'últim patriarca*, published in 2008 by Morocco-Catalan author Najat El Hachmi. Curiously, this novel is written in the Catalan language – thus, how can it be considered as the most visible example of *Hispano-Moroccan* literature (see Ingenschay 2011: 61)? In the context of the present chapter, I would not be able to develop an exhaustive discussion about whether this text forms a part of *Hispano-Moroccan* fiction or whether it should rather be ranked among the more general and global concept of migration literature(s). However, this chapter will start out from the cautious assumption that *L'últim patriarca* can at least be regarded in relation to this literary field of *Hispano-Moroccan* literature for two reasons: first, due to the author's thematic choices, as we will see hereinafter and, second, due to her sociocultural location, which both allow El Hachmi to be regrouped at the very least at the margins of the aforementioned fiction. However, this example already divulges the difficulty of literary classifications in categories such as 'national literature,' a grouping that, in fact, has become obsolete but nevertheless still exists – and is also kept alive by virtue of the national literary prize markets.<sup>2</sup>

Even if El Hachmi's novel has been repeatedly analyzed in the past decade, I wish to examine it regarding this volume's purposes, that is, how a female author writes about her (or more generally expressed: about a female's) situation 'after' migration. By this, I want to add to

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2008: 29-32), I am opting for *Hispano-Moroccan* literature as it terminologically focusses on its position between and beyond national (literary) boundaries.

<sup>2</sup> Ana Rueda likewise points out this difficulty of labelling El Hachmi and her works and suggests the terminological revision and extension of those notions: "[...] widen the narrow and reductionist terms of 'Spanish literature' or 'Moroccan literature' because it [El Hachmi's essay *Jo també sóc catalana*] choses to tell a Hispano-Moroccan border experience through the Catalan language" (Rueda 2010: 19; original version: "[...] ensanchar los términos angostos y reduccionistas de 'literatura española' o 'literatura marroquí' porque elige narrar una experiencia hispano-marroquí de frontera a través del catalán").

this volume’s issue both a literary perspective and a literary sociological approach by regarding El Hachmi’s novel less as an autobiographically motivated text. Instead, I wish to view the novel more as, ostensibly, literature in the sense Frühwald et al. concluded in general about the humanities, but that I assess as being applicable to literary specifics, that is, referring to “culture as an embodiment of all human work and life-forms, [...] that means that they [humanities] refer in an understanding and explaining way as well as in an enlightening emancipating manner to the cultural shape of the world” (Frühwald et al. 1991: 16; translated by J.T.).<sup>3</sup> But that consideration also implies I have to raise critical questions of how we can deal with literature in such a discussion and where and why there are its limits.

For this, I will start by briefly introducing ‘female’ *Hispano-Moroccan* literature and linking it to whether there are thematic or structural differences between works of female authors living in the Maghreb and works of those who have migrated to Spain. In this context, I will then present the aforementioned novel by Najat El Hachmi by analyzing some noticeable techniques of the female narrating voice and by examining how those techniques and strategies create a particular female position(ing) referring to both the culture the narrator is ‘coming from’ and the one where she ‘has arrived.’

## 2. Differing female positionings

Although *Hispano-Maghrebian* authors have remained relatively unknown to the public, some scholars, especially in Spain, Morocco and the United States, have recently started focussing on this authorship, which currently counts more than 60 writers in / from Morocco as well as a few authors in Algeria and Tunisia. This disproportional location of *Hispano-Maghrebian* writers can be explained by the long historical interrelations between Morocco and Spain, which reach back with more than a 1000 years of mutual geopolitical and sociocultural influences

<sup>3</sup> Original version: “Die Geisteswissenschaften beziehen sich auf Kultur als Inbegriff aller menschlichen Arbeit und Lebensformen [...], d.h., sie beziehen sich verstehend und erklärend, ferner in Aufklärungs- und Emanzipationsform auf die kulturelle Form der Welt” (Frühwald et al. 1991: 16).

and connections. If we then consider what the Franco-Algerian writer Assia Djebar noted: that women “from the first times of Islam were bit by bit expelled from writing as power” in the so-called Arabic cultures (Djebar 1999: 75-76; translation J.T.),<sup>4</sup> the number of female Maghrebian writers who express themselves in Spanish (and / or Catalan) is even more impressive. To mention just some names other than Najat El Hachmi: Rachida Gharrafi, Suad Abdelouarit, Sana Aloui, Oumama Aouad Larech, Sanae Chairi, Karima Aomar Toufali, Laila Karrouch (who publishes in Catalan and Spanish and also translates her Catalan texts into Spanish) or Montserrat Abumalham. From the aforementioned writers, the last two are living in Spain, which is important because this, in no way exhaustive, list is then a juxtaposition of authors being either in Spain or in Morocco but who are not separated or distinguished on the basis of their living place.

So, by taking into account that everybody has such a “place,” I do not refer to the geographical site. Instead, we need to ask more precisely *from where these writers speak* (according to Stuart Hall 1990 and Fernando de Toro 1995), which indicates their enunciated location and their *locus* of enunciation. Here, we can clearly note that Najat El Hachmi and Laila Karrouch express themselves from Catalonia (Ingen-schay 2011: 68). But other *hispanograph* authors located in Morocco also partially write from such an Iberian perspective (see e.g., Chakor 2007; also Tauchnitz 2016), which is why it is so difficult to decide whether El Hachmi and Karrouch are also *Hispano-Moroccan* writers. On the contrary, the perspective in Montserrat Abumalham’s case, though living in Spain, differs from El Hachmi’s and Karrouch’s as no obvious perspectivation or positioning is visible in her novel *¿Te acuerdas de Shahrzad?* (2001; see also Ellison 2017).

But I do not want to dwell on the figures related to these female authors. Rather, I want to turn my attention to the topoi of this fiction, which is essential in positioning these female writing voices. And in this chapter, I will restrict my explanations to authors linked to Spain and Morocco to better compare the emphasis in their thematic choices.

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<sup>4</sup> Original version: “[...] dès les premiers temps de l’islam, on a peu à peu expulsé les femmes de l’écriture comme pouvoir [...]” (Djebar 1999 : 75-76).

First of all, it needs to be underlined that a large and heterogeneous spectrum of issues are brought up in *Hispano-Moroccan* narrative and poetic texts.<sup>5</sup> Even though a shift of topics between the two female Catalan authors and others writing from Morocco is evident and meaningful, it should, nevertheless, be clearly said that both ‘sides’ frequently deal with the relation between Spain and its southern neighbour – yet in different ways that are also linked to the chosen genre, as will be developed in the following passages. Thus, in poetic texts, this trans-cultural and transnational tie is often evoked – at least as a backdrop – by showing the two countries as mirrors reflecting each other and by pointing out the very often painful awareness of their inseparable connection. Remarkable is that here, where this relation between the two cultures is concerned, the enunciated position of the either male or female lyrical subject hardly plays a role. From Abderrahman El Fathi to Suad Abdelouarit, they all express the sensation of a lost love, often generally personified by Andalusia, and the fact that Spain is trying to neglect this relation.

In narrative texts, in turn, this kind of expressed ‘kinship’ is equally one of the predominant issues. But here, it is always and strongly dependent on a specific spatial representation. And in this point, the perspectives of El Hachmi and Karrouch, on the one hand, and those of the *Hispano-Moroccan* women who express themselves from Morocco, on the other, differ the most: while the novels by El Hachmi and Karrouch mostly concentrate on one space,<sup>6</sup> the texts published by writers *in* Morocco evoke three spaces:

First, *Morocco* itself (often limited to the country’s northern regions), which is drawn as the ground for lives led in misery due to a

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<sup>5</sup> So far, no play has been penned by a *Hispano-Moroccan* (or *Hispano-Maghrebian*) female writer.

<sup>6</sup> One could counter though that, in El Hachmi’s novel *L’últim patriarca* (2008), Morocco is also a predominant space, especially in the first part when the readership learns about the narrator’s father Mimoun and his childhood and youth there. Though, in this case, the storyteller – Mimoun’s daughter – establishes a particular situation of distance towards the narrated story as, until the end of this first part, she is hidden behind a pretended omniscient narrator telling the story from an extradiegetic position. Additionally, the daughter speaks clearly and openly from her position in Catalonia – always being aware of the migratory situation she and her family live in. This topic will be scrutinized in the following chapters.

corrupt political system and due to poverty or to inequality of educational opportunities and predetermined social roles.

Second, the spatial and social *passage in-between the two countries*, that is the Mediterranean Sea, and here the misery linked to Morocco itself finds its superlative: the sea is always presented as the space where a mostly female individual has to face her own death. That does not mean that the narrated human subject always dies in these texts. But the unbearable circumstances in the homeland must be exceeded by the danger of the Mediterranean space to make the reader understand the irrevocable exigency for the narratives' characters to leave their country and, thus, willingly accept the risks of this perilous passage.

And these first two spaces lead to the third type of narrative texts that concentrate on the Moroccan-Spanish ties: some of the works written by female authors located in Morocco focus on the *space of destination*. However, Spain is nearly never presented as a paradisiac *Eldorado* where all former social and economic problems are solved (whereas, in extratextual social reality, it is sometimes still perceived as such according to Bueno Alonso 2012: 34); when drawn as an idyllic and welcoming harbour, then that drawing is just to unmask a character's naïve ideas and contrast them with the relentless revelations of the text's voice about Spain. That is, the narrating instance in those texts is, from the beginning, aware of the frequently illusory conception of the related figures. Additionally striking is that this *space of destination* is often defined homogeneously: the reader is confronted with a disillusioned vision of a country where migrant's wishes do not come true. Thus, Spain is repeatedly presented in a sobering but inflexible way, going from one extreme to another: instead of repeating the stereotypical romantic *locus amoenus*, it turns into a uniform *locus terribilis* for the Moroccan immigrant.

In comparison to this less differentiated perspective on the part of female writers living in Morocco, both Najat El Hachmi and Laila Karrouch draft a more heterogeneous and multifaceted image of their country of residence. The relation between female authors living in Morocco and those residing in Spain can be better captured if we take into account what Francophone postcolonial research has elaborated since the 1980s, if not before, though the comparison manifests the lack of theory formation about *Hispano-Maghrebian* literature(s). I am concretely

referring to Hargreaves’ distinction between a “first generation of Maghrebian novelists born and raised across the Mediterranean” and a “new generation coming from emigration”<sup>7</sup> (1995: 24), which nevertheless is a problematic and, rightly, much discussed concept. Tahar Djaout pointed out that authors, having migrated, “continue to be inspired by a desire to write ‘from the Maghreb,’ a desire to insert themselves into a specifically Maghrebian set of problems at the very moment when they have aesthetically and allegorically distanced themselves from the Maghreb” (Djaout 1992: 218) whereas the ‘second generation’, born in France, sides with the country of residence (cf. *ibid.*).

The same *glissement* in perspectives is observable in the female *Hispano-Maghrebian* literature(s) with the significant difference that the decisive temporal-spatial shift of migration took place in another way. That means, the viewpoint of the so-called ‘first generation’ of Franco-Maghrebian immigrant writers is similar to the one of *Hispano-Maghrebian* authors who *did not* migrate. Thus, the Francophone ‘first generation’ moved physically, whereas the sometimes visible (textual) displacement of Moroccan authors writing in Spanish is a *thought* one. Nevertheless, the comparability between both literatures is visible in specific details such as the positioning within fiction: both address openly their French or Spanish public, which becomes obvious when daily habits in northern Africa or Muslim religious customs are clarified – explanations a Maghrebian reader would not need.

Against the background of this narrow overview of (female) *Hispano-Maghrebian* literature(s), I will now look closer at the novel *L’últim patriarca* by Najat El Hachmi, concentrating on the particular narrative strategies that underline the distance or, inversely, the closeness of the narrator toward her “origins” and toward her life in Spain. But it is also necessary at least to indicate the problems related to such analytic observations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Original versions: “[...] la première génération de romanciers maghrébins nés et élevés outre-Méditerranée” and “[...] la nouvelle génération issue de l’émigration” (Hargreaves 1995: 24).

<sup>8</sup> For a closer reading of the novel in the sense of an autobiographical fictional text, see Codina 2017.

### 3. Breaking with the autobiographical testimony – *L'últim patriarca* by Najat El Hachmi

*L'últim patriarca* (2008), the novel with which Najat El Hachmi won the prestigious *Premi de les Lletres Catalanes Ramon Llull*, treats the history of the female first person narrator's family. It is divided into two equal parts, the first one retracing the life of her father, Mimoun, a choleric patriarch, who was born in Morocco and left his country and his family to work in Spain until his wife and children joined him there years later. In the second part, the development of the then autodiegetic narrator, Mimoun's daughter, and her process of liberation from the violent and oppressive father become the centres of focus.

What, *prima facie*, could be understood as the trajectory of a 'classic' *Bildungsroman* (see Ricci 2005, 2011) is combined with a particular textual structure that prevents the reader from applying, from the beginning, any traditional literary patterns. In fact, right in the first sentences, the novel sets an impossible narrative perspective (see Inghenschay 2011: 62):

This is the story of Mimoun, son of Driouch, son of Allal, son of Mohamed, son of Mohand, son of Bouziane, whom we shall simply call Mimoun. It is his story and the story of the last of the great patriarchs who make up the long line of Driouch's forbears. Every single one lived, acted and intervened in the lives of those around them as resolutely as the imposing figures in the Bible.<sup>9</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: vii)

Even if the narrator did not explicitly hint at the Holy Writ, we would have been able to detect the architextual reference to the biblical construction (a so-called *Isnad*, as we see in the Old Testament in general and in Genesis in particular). Ironically, imitating this archetypal text and recounting how, with Mimoun, this chain of patriarchal hierarchy ended unmistakably announce Mimoun's subsequent decline. Thus, Mimoun's daughter starts her narration by evoking a period of her

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<sup>9</sup> Original version: "Aquesta és la història de Mimoun, fill de Driouch, fill d'Allal, fill de Mohamed, fill de Mohand, fill de Bouziane, i que nosaltres anomenarem, simplement, Mi-moun. És la seva història i la història de l'últim dels grans patriarques que formen la llarga cadena dels avantpassats de Driouch" (El Hachmi 2008: 7).



father’s life that she actually cannot talk about *as a witness* because it was long time before her own birth.

Furthermore, two other aspects underline the narrator’s essential function and enlarge it discernibly. By evoking an exclusively masculine genealogy, the feminine perspective of the narrating daughter receives even more weight as it only seems to be a story about men. However, a woman is now speaking – a female subject who, though missing in this patriarchal enumeration, holds the power to (re)tell and build her family’s story. The performatory potential – through speaking, she *creates* her father as a reduced version of himself – reveals the novel as a subversive enunciative space where the hegemonic “speaking about” is reversed. But also, in the telling, the narrator distances herself from her role as a daughter by showing a noticeable lack of respect for her father and by renouncing the family’s hierarchical order as she suggests simply calling him Mimoun. the end of the patriarchy is not just prospectively declared and developed throughout the novel; on the discursive level, it is already fulfilled in the opening sentence.

What does this mean in the context of our reflections? The dense and complex introduction of the novel opens up an enunciative space that radically breaks with established textual and literary categories such as autobiographical testimony, which many migrant writers have repeatedly employed (see also Bonn 1994, 1995).<sup>10</sup> Of course, it contains “reference places” (“lieux de référence”), as Léonora Miano named them (2012: 6). And so, El Hachmi’s novel emanates from a concrete situation of enunciation; nevertheless, that does not permit it to be reduced to an exclusively autobiographical reading.

In the same way, *L’últim patriarca* cannot be generally classified as *littérature engagée* (in the sense of the Francocaribbean *Créolité* authors, not Sartre; Bernabé et al. 1993 [1989]). Only in parts does the narration reveal a direct political objective. This occurs, for example, when the text speaks against the patriarchy – which is intensified when, a few pages after the beginning, we can read a Deleuzian ‘repetition and

<sup>10</sup> However, Bueno Alonso states that this novel “joins the first texts of Francophone Maghrebian female writers” as she concentrates on the autobiographical aspects in this narration (2012: 38, translation J.T.; original version: “Le roman rejoint les premiers textes des romancières maghrébines francophones; il s’agit d’une narration de type autobiographique [...]”).

difference' of the introductory phrase: "On that day, after three daughters, a first son was born to Driouch of Allal of Mohammed of Mohand of Bouziane, etc." (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 3).<sup>11</sup> Here, all of a sudden, first the women are mentioned, and only *then* are the patriarchs named. In addition, the *et cetera* at the end of that phrase is a quasi-blasphemous indication that the narrator will not simply take over traditional (and religious!) customs but that she will critically revise every detail she knows and had taken for granted. By this, the text reveals a definite rupture with predetermined and allocated female social roles and functions. In this aspect, yes, the novel is decidedly an example of a *literature of commitment* to strengthen the female's position within her culture and society, something made possible or facilitated also thanks to the socio-spatial distance from the country of the narrator's family's origin.

Nonetheless, the repeatedly perceptible commitment on the semantic level is undermined on the discursive one, which often counters the related story. The specific device that leads to questioning the events can be summarized as a *technique of created uncertainty*. It is a complex strategy that combines a narration consisting of insecurity caused by varying and relativizing viewpoints and humoresque insertions ill-befitting the told moments: humour is specifically used in the cruellest situations of the narrator's life. This strategy of created uncertainty engenders an extreme distance to the narrated plot but also entertains doubts if what was read can actually be what is told, that is, it demands a constant questioning of the lector's reading process.

To explain this point, I will give two significant examples: the first one goes back to Mimoun's adolescence. At the wedding of an older cousin, Mimoun leaves the festivities for a moment to go to the nearby river. There, he is probably violated by his own uncle, which remains an open secret never touched on by any family member. Instead, an adventurous – impossible – story circulates that Mimoun had seen a goat that talked to him in the depth of the night, which would have frightened him to death. The narrating voice alternates between precisely reproducing this obviously fictitious tale, giving exact details of

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<sup>11</sup> Original version: "Aquell dia va néixer, després de tres nenes, el primer dels fills de Driouch d'Allal de Mohamed de Mohand de Bouziane, etc." (El Hachmi 2008: 11).

how the moon shone over the scenario or by repeating what the goat said to Mimoun:

The moon was shining on the little stream trickling there, and there was *probably* a slight mist, that mist that hangs close to the ground. In the middle of that serene, silent night, a goat rose up on his hind legs on the highest wall of the riverbank and looked at Mimoun. It stared at him and said: Have you seen my son?<sup>12</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 23; emphasis J.T.)

The narrator frames a pastoral idyllic scenery that culminates in a fairy-tale setting when the personified animal starts to address Mimoun. But it is exactly the formulation of this fantastic picture that raises doubts because the narrating voice gives all these details she cannot possibly know. These suspicious descriptions are subsequently even augmented when the reader learns that family versions are circulating of what had happened that night. However, of these versions, the most logical explanation is presented as being the most exaggerated and therefore most incredible story. The narrator describes this taboo in such a harmless way that the incident’s atrocity is exponentiated in an inversely proportional way:

Other non-official versions abound in the family. *Some say* it was the alcohol flowing at the wedding party [...]. The most unofficial version of all is the one nobody ever recounts: [...] *it isn’t beyond the realm of possibility* that, tired of assailing donkeys and hens, [the grandmother’s brother had] taken advantage of the euphoria of the moment to find a more human cavity in which to slot his erect member.<sup>13</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 23-24; emphases J.T.)

<sup>12</sup> Original version: “La lluna i lluminava la poca aigua que circulava, lenta, i es devia percebre una boira tènue, d’aquella que només es deixa caure arran de terra. Enmig de la serenor i la quietud de la nit va aparèixer, al damunt de la paret més alta del marge, una cabra ben dreta que esguardava Mimoun. El mirava fixament i li va dir: has vist el meu fill?” (El Hachmi 2008: 33-34).

<sup>13</sup> Original version: “Altres versions no oficials corren per la família. 1) Hi ha qui diu que va ser per culpa de les begudes alcohòliques que corrien pel casament [...]. 2) La versió menys oficial de totes és la que no s’explica mai: [...] no és estranya la possibilitat que [el germà de l’àvia], cansat d’investir ases i gallines, aprofités l’eufòria del moment per buscar una cavitat més humana on introduir el seu member erecte” (El Hachmi 2008: 34).

As the violation act is developed in such a harmless passing mention, it could easily be overread at first glance, and thus, the story manipulates the reader by using the moment of astonishment to display the full ferocity of the text. In addition, and as seen in the two previous quotations, the text produces insecurity by frequently using expressions such as “probably,” “some say” or an implicit double negation (“it isn’t beyond the realm of possibility”). Nothing seems to be assured – the most improbable actions exempted. Of course, the uncertainty in this first example is also generated by all this happening long before the narrator was born.

I want to contrast this example with a second one where the same technique is applied, but this time, the focus lies on the narrator herself. In this second case, Mimoun’s family is arriving in Spain and seeing for the first time the dreadful hole in which they are obliged to live. Thus, while the mother starts cleaning the flat, the father goes for a walk with the children. When they come back home, the narrating daughter states:

We wandered for several hours until we got back to the apartment, which was no longer the same. It smelled of the country we’d left behind because mother was already cooking. *We were all happy*, and felt *strange* with that *odd* but pleasant man next to our mother, who’d suffered so much. *We were happy for a long time*. Or that’s what I’d always thought, because that first stage *lasted ages*, up to the *strange* incident of the knife at midnight.<sup>14</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 152; emphases J.T.)

The expressively demonstrated happiness, mentioned twice, is at no point credible. First, it is paired with attributes of oddity, which generate an atmosphere of threat that thwarts this pretended idyll. Second, the narrating voice ironizes this image of a harmonious family by stretching the time span of this joyful period “that lasted ages” – though, as the reader discovers immediately in the following sentence, this

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<sup>14</sup> Original version: “Vam estar de ruta diverses hores fins que vam tornar al pis, que ja no era el mateix. Feia l’olor del país que havíem deixat enrere perquè la mare ja cuinava. *Estaven contents, tots dos*, i a nosaltres se’ns feia estrany aquell home tan estrany i agradable al costat de la mare, que havia patit tant. *Vam ser feliços molt de temps*. O això era el que jo sempre havia cregut, que la primera època havia estat molt llarga, fins a l’estrany incident del ganivet a mitjanit” (El Hachmi 2008: 172; emphases J.T.).

interval was of short duration: “But mother says we’d only been back in father’s life for three months when the strange incident of the knife at midnight struck [...]”<sup>15</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 152). And third, the felicity is directly relativized by the daughter’s remark: “[o]r that’s what I’d always thought [...],” which shows a mistrust in personal memory. Thus, not only is the remembering about the father’s life scrutinized; the own perspective is also presented as not being trustworthy and, throughout the whole novel, this remembering act is constantly questioned. At the same time, the openly threatening allusion to a so far unknown episode with a knife is softened by repetition of the word “strange.” Thus, while the underlined oddity is somehow used to weaken the credibility of a past but persisting family luck, at the same moment, it intensifies the danger to make the reader understand it affectively by feeling a coming peril. To augment this sensation of menace, the narrator once more employs the technique of literal repetition of complete sentence fragments, which seem to artificially cover the told story by foregrounding discursive methods. So, the chapter concludes with the quoted phrase, and the new passage is entitled: “The strange incident of the knife at midnight”<sup>16</sup> (El Hachmi 2010 [2008]: 153).

And this leads us to a first conclusion. Instead of simply allowing the reader to perceive this novel as a testimonial text about migratory movements and cultural differences that are permanently negotiated, this narration repeatedly draws attention to the textual/material level, to the ludic manipulatory strategies of the novel that increase the artificiality of what is told and give all the discursive power to the narrating daughter of this last family patriarch. By this, the nowhere-named storyteller turns into an almighty puppeteer who degrades the patriarch’s role to that of a marionette. And this omnipotence of the narrator again can be read as a blasphemic act: the real power lies no longer in the violent acts of a choleric father but in the act of the daughter speaking.

<sup>15</sup> Original version: “Però la mare diu que no feia més de tres mesos que havíem arribat a la vida del pare quan es va esdevenir l’estrany incident del Ganivet a mitjanit [...]” (El Hachmi 2008: 172).

<sup>16</sup> Original version: “L’estrany incident del ganivet a mitjanit” (El Hachmi 2008: 173).

That means – and this I want to emphasize: *L'últim patriarca* is neither an autobiography nor, as a whole, a text of commitment. The novel definitely takes position referring to the extratextually lived reality of migrants, related to what they socially and culturally carry to their country of residence. In the same way, the narration speaks up strongly against the suppression of women, especially when men legitimate it by referring to (pseudo-)cultural or (pseudo-)religious conditions and heritage. And at the same time, *L'últim patriarca* speaks up against the submission of women in the sense of them accepting this role. But yet, if we focussed exclusively on those aspects, we would “use” the text (as Umberto Eco had differentiated between *interpretazione* and *uso* of literature; e.g., 1995 [1990]: 32-33). Thus, we should avoid reducing the novel to a simple alternative explanatory source on sociocultural and political ongoingings and not forget that an author has the right to elucidate the world, and the right not to. And the presented examples have shown that the importance and the force of this narration (also) go beyond its socio-political *engagement* and offer a unique set of discursive strategies and literary techniques that do not simply confirm or oppose an ongoing cultural debate but underline primarily the literaricity of this novel.

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