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The New Identity of a Moroccan Immigrant Woman in *The Last Patriarch* by Najat el Hachmi

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RESUMEN:

Este trabajo analiza la novela *El último patriarca* de la escritora catalana-marroquí, Najat El Hachmi, centrándose en la transformación del modelo de mujer inmigrante tradicional al de mujer ciudadana catalana en la sociedad contemporánea española. En esta novela la autora introduce la voz de una mujer inmigrante-marroquí que rompe con la tradición patriarcal que le imponen sus padres. Esta transformación de la protagonista se analiza desde su identidad como mujer inmigrante a la de una mujer ciudadana en la Cataluña contemporánea. Najat El Hachmi, al introducir la voz de una inmigrante marroquí en la narrativa catalana, cuestiona los discursos identitarios de los nacionalismos catalanes actuales, en cuanto introduce en la sociedad catalana nuevas formas culturales de representar al inmigrante desde la diferencia de clase, género, nacionalidad y lenguas diversas.

Palabras clave: inmigración, nacionalismo catalán, ciudadanía, patriarcado, identidad

ABSTRACT:

This work analyzes the novel *The Last Patriarch* by Catalan-Moroccan writer Najat El Hachmi, focusing on the transformation undergone by the protagonist, who moves from being a traditional, immigrant woman to becoming a citizen of, and a self-empowered woman in, contemporary Spanish society. In this novel, the author introduces the voice of an immigrant-Moroccan woman who breaks with the patriarchal tradition imposed by her parents and creates a new –and hybrid– identity for herself. In so doing, Najat El Hachmi questions several identity discourses –particularly nationalist discourses– and dramatizes the introduction of new cultural forms into present-day Catalan society.

Keywords: immigration, Catalan nationalism, citizenship, patriarchal tradition, identity

In *The Last Patriarch* by Najat El Hachmi, the author introduces the voice of a Moroccan immigrant woman who breaks with the patriarchal tradition imposed by her parents. The questions discussed in this essay are: What narrative strategies used by the author in this novel represent the voice of the patriarch's daughter? How does the protagonist reject the prototypes of Moroccan womanhood represented by her family? Through this process, as I shall argue, the protagonist breaks with the patriarchal tradition that her father imposes on her and, by extension, on her whole family. As a result, she acquires a new identity, becoming a transnational citizen, that is to say, a woman who transcends national, cultural and linguistic borders in order to adopt new values and cultural practices of coexistence between different cultures in the Catalan society.

These cultural practices are related to the border identity with which the author herself identifies. In the preface to her first book *Jo també soc Catalan (I am Catalan too)*, (2004) Najat defines her border identity in the following terms: "*pensament de frontera que serveix per entendre dues realitats diferents, una manera de fer, d'actuar, de ser, de sentir, d'estimar, una manera de buscar la felicitat a cavall entre dos mons*" ("A border identity that helps to understand two different realities, a way of doing, acting, being, feeling and loving. A way to pursue happiness between two worlds") (Najat, 2014 :14, translation mine). The author thus articulates a way of thinking that no longer identifies her with her parents, or with the local Catalans living within her community. Therefore, this reality goes beyond the two cultures with which the author herself identifies, Catalan and Moroccan, and refers to the identity concept articulated by the cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha in his 2004 book *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha coins the concept of "third space" to define the processes of hybridization and cultural difference that characterize modern societies as a result of colonialism and postcolonialism, globalization, mass migration and cultural diasporas (Codina, 2012: 1). According to the literary critic Cristian Ricci, this crossing of borders affecting both the author and the protagonist of *The Last Patriarch* endows this novel with a cross-cultural, pluralistic and diverse agenda that favours intersections and the interrelation of elements, where nothing is completely foreign or predetermined, an agenda that simultaneously reveals the contradictions permeating western societies, societies that, on the one hand, try to protect – and at the same time exoticize – the immigrant

and, on the other, exploit North African migrants and expel them from Europe (Ricci, 2010: 73).

Najat's literary work is inserted in the context of North African migrations to Spain, a phenomenon that has taken place between the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century¹. In an interview with a literary online magazine called *Vilaweb*, Najat El Hachmi says: "In other countries, immigration is indeed a pride, but this does not occur as such in Catalonia, where the cultural elite does not give importance to this phenomenon, let alone its representation in literature" (Najat, 2017: 10, translation mine).

With regards to the above-mentioned idea, it is interesting to analyze social media reactions when, in 2008, Najat El Hachmi was awarded the Ramon Llull literary prize, the most prestigious award for literature in Catalan, for her novel *The Last Patriarch*. Newspaper headlines described her as a Moroccan immigrant woman who had won the Ramon Llull, thereby giving more importance to the ethnic origin of the winner than to her creative literary work. Therefore, this author is highly critical of the politicization of her writing by certain Catalan nationalist political parties, since she believes they tend to take all the credit, claiming that she won the Ramon Llull literary award due to the migration policies carried out by their political parties. This statement is rather ironic as it suggests that Catalan literature would not have produced a Moroccan immigrant writer, had the Nationalist Party in power not implemented specific integration policies. In connection with this politicization stemming from the nationalist political parties in Catalonia, which the author has fallen victim to, Najat states the following: "I realized the kind of country I was living in when I left school at the age of 18 and could not work because I did not have a work permit, despite having lived most of my life in Barcelona" (Najat, 2010: 18, translation mine).² The author thus denounces, from her own experience as a woman and as a Moroccan immigrant-Catalan writer, that the society in which she lives assigns specific roles to immigrants. It is not a contradiction that her novels and literary production are related to the changes and transformations of the immigrant Moroccan community in Catalonia.

As Kathryn Everly argues in her article "Immigrant Identity and Intertextuality", in this novel, the Moroccan Catalan writer displays several instances of intertextuality that remind us of the novel *The Time*

of *the Doves* (1962) by Catalan writer Mercè Rodoreda. According to Everly, these samples of intertextuality help to create a parallelism between the cultural, national and sexual inequalities affecting North African immigrant women in our contemporaneity and Catalan working-class women during the postwar period in Spain. At the same time, Najat is thus highlighting that gender inequality is not a phenomenon unique to a particular culture or tradition, but a phenomenon to be analyzed across different cultures, backgrounds and nationalities.

The literary critic Cristian Ricci also analyzes *The Last Patriarch* in his article "L'últim patriarca de Najat el Hachmi y el forjamiento de una identidad amazighcatalana". In it, Ricci focuses on the autobiographical elements of this novel, while also examining how the text presents a narrative told from the point of view of an adult woman who subverts a family status defined by religious and traditional practices in a society that promotes phallogocentric supremacy (Ricci, 2010: 72).

While those works analyze Najat's novel *The Last Patriarch* from different perspectives, encompassing intertextuality, autobiography and the immigration phenomenon, this work focuses on analyzing how the cultural, linguistic and sexual changes experienced by an immigrant woman make her break with the patriarchal tradition imposed by her parents.

1. LIVING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part consists of 38 short chapters in which the author describes the life of the patriarch living between two worlds. The second part of the novel consists of 39 chapters that describe the process of acculturation that the patriarch faces in the Catalan society he now inhabits. The family comes to Spain as a result of family reunification. It should be noted that it is this very same pattern of migration that brought the author to Catalonia when she was just eight years old. The feeling of living between two worlds is experienced differently by the mother and the daughter. From the mother's perspective, Catalonia is a totally alien space where there is no possibility of establishing relationships with other women of their own culture. This is because of the isolation in which the family is living, in Vic, away from the center of the city; Barcelona's Raval district is the area where the vast majority of immigrants

of Moroccan origin live in Catalonia. This contrast between mother and daughter – and their relationship with the patriarch – defines the migrating experience of Moroccan women. According to the critic Teresa Losada in her article entitled "Moroccan immigrant women in Spain": "Moroccan women from rural areas tend to maintain traditional values and ways of behaving, which provides a means of stability within the family and community. In contrast, younger female migrants are attracted to the new values of the host country. This often results in cultural and generational conflict due to their parent's resistance to the changes which this new society represents" (Losada, 1993:10, translation mine).

2. PROTOTYPES OF MOROCCAN AND CATALAN WOMEN

As the daughter is in the process of adapting to the new host society, the tension between her and her parents becomes clear: "Mother insisted on making me do housework, teaching me to prepare meals that didn't look like dog vomit" (Najat, 2008: 202, translation mine). Gradually, the mother's instructions lead the daughter to interrogate and eventually break with the ideas of proper female behaviour inherited from her mother and sanctioned by her father. At the same time, the daughter grows apart from her mother and shies away from seeing her as a role model.

The daughter identifies herself more and more with the emotional and intellectual models of womanhood available within Catalan society: "It was with her help that I began to understand music, it was her that recommended Erich Fromm to me, and it was her that finally got me wearing bras that women wear" (Najat, 2008: 272, translation mine). Gradually, the patriarch's daughter comes to identify herself with the lifestyle and attitudes of Catalan and Spanish women. In an article entitled "Moroccan women in Catalonia: between transgression and change" Rosa Alcalde, Cristina García, Raquel Moreno and Marta Ramírez distinguish three models of migrant women who represent and enact three types of female cultural integration strategies often adopted by immigrant women. The first model describes women who retain and perpetuate the social and cultural traditions of the country of origin. This model is characterized by a segregation of public and private spaces by gender. This contributes to a vital segregation between men and women. In the novel, this first model of immigrant women would

be represented by the patriarch's wife, as discussed above. This model instills in the daughter tasks and traditional models of womanhood learned in their home country, Morocco. The second model is represented by women who question the traditional model and develop what we could call "transition strategies" (Alcalde et al., 2002: 28). In this model, despite maintaining a traditional role, women would introduce certain lifestyle changes. The patriarch's daughter follows this second model during her adolescent stage, because she questions patriarchal and maternal power. In this respect, she will be approaching the third model which is that of an immigrant woman who develops strategies for change. It is during this time as an adult that the patriarch's daughter becomes aware of her own transformation as a Moroccan immigrant woman, which eventually leads her to rebel against parental authority and acquire her own identity as a female citizen living in contemporary Catalan society.

The 25th chapter of the second part is entitled "Desire". In this chapter, the author narrates the first trip that the patriarch's daughter takes to Morocco once her family has been established in Catalonia. The patriarch's daughter describes, in her own words, how the trip makes her feel: "For me, it was exciting to return to that faraway place, which was no longer my home, but had aromas of childhood" (Najat, 2008: 234, translation mine). During this trip, the patriarch's daughter meets one of the family members with whom she says she identifies the most, her uncle: "He has something in his eyes, a memory of me, and he was the first one in the family who did not make me feel that I had been born in the wrong place. He asked me about the things that interested me and he was interested in the subjects I studied at high school" (Najat, 2008: 281, translation mine).

This relationship with her uncle who lives in France will be very important for the patriarch's daughter as it will be with her uncle that she will eventually establish an intellectual and emotional bond, which will help her break free from the patriarchal figure of her father and accept herself as an immigrant woman in contemporary Catalan society. In contrast to this relationship, the patriarch's daughter discovers, after her own trip, that one of the reasons why her father took her to Morocco was to give her in marriage to a suitor related to her Moroccan family: "I was not married, and soon I discovered that what father wanted was just that, to give me in marriage to someone who only wanted Spanish

citizenship" (Najat, 2008: 285, translation mine). Back in the capital of the region where her family lives, the patriarch's daughter begins her first sexual experience with a Catalan man. This sexual awakening is important because it makes her construct her own identity as a Moroccan-Catalan immigrant woman in the host society. At the same time, she discovers the power of the Catalan language by reading a Catalan dictionary. Reading this dictionary, letter by letter, from A to Z, will allow her to learn new words in Catalan which will provide her with new meanings and a connection to the Catalan language and culture. As the literary critic Kathryn Everly says: "The words from the Catalan dictionary provide a constant reminder at the end of each chapter of the progress toward the goal of self-expression" (Everly, 2011: 145). In parallel with the realization of her ability to write, the protagonist awakens to her own sexuality by announcing to the reader her full autonomy to determine freely with whom she chooses to have sexual relationships. This can be considered a revolutionary act within the Moroccan patriarchal society that the novel portrays.

3. TAKING THE STEPS TOWARDS HER OWN AUTONOMY

Chapter 36 is entitled "The angels are swearing at you". In this chapter, the author describes the marriage of the patriarch's daughter to her Moroccan boyfriend. At the end of the description, the author states that this story is over: "The story could end here, as in any American film, happily ever after, but did not have to be either a film or the story of a love affair. This was intended to be the story of how patriarchy was lost in the line of succession of the Driouch, and, more broadly, how destiny is not be entirely written" (Najat, 2008: 324, translation mine). This is a narrative strategy to end the story in Chapter 36, only three chapters before the end of the novel. This technique shows the reader that once the patriarch's daughter has achieved her goal, which was to break the patriarchal model imposed on her by her family, the author shares with the reader the following reflection using the first person singular: "That's when I began to think that I have to take control of my own life and perhaps it was time to stop making excuses. It was then that I took the decision that will change everything" (Najat, 2008: 329, translation mine). From this moment onwards, the patriarch's daughter takes charge of her own life and begins to decide for herself her own destiny, first ending her first marriage, then living alone, and eventually, starting her life over with

the uncle who she met when she visited Morocco. In the following quotation, the patriarch's daughter describes her desire to acquire personal autonomy: "I have rented an apartment, I'm working in a restaurant in the evenings and studying in the mornings. I can make it. But, but ... I don't know what her 'but' was, the whole situation was a huge BUT as regards traditions and the established order they had taught her. An order that has been shattered, at least in our family" (Najat, 2008: 331, translation mine). In this way the author reflects on the patriarch's daughter's new identity, the identity of an independent woman.

4. THE DIFFICULTIES OF BREAKING WITH THE PATRIARCH

While the patriarch's daughter manages to break with her family traditions, at the same time, she reflects on the relationship with her father as follows: "He did not understand that the problem with me was the way he acted as a father. It had nothing to do with taking drugs, committing crimes or whatever it was. The worst thing he did to me was not to protect me, because I needed to protect myself from him" (Najat, 2008: 332, translation mine). Teresa Losada in her article on "Moroccan immigrant women in Spain" analyzes the role of parents within first-generation Moroccan communities and states that "the most painful cost is borne by the father many times, as his image of 'the head of the house' and spokesperson in the family and the social group is diminished and reduced" (Losada, 1993). This break has a double meaning in the novel. For the father, it involves a tragic breakdown which will displace him from his patriarchal role within his family. However, for the daughter, it will add a new meaning to her identity, which will transform her as an immigrant woman in contemporary Catalonia.

In an interview for the on-line magazine *Women in the network*, when Najat El Hachmi was asked if patriarchy had ended for the second-generation children from immigrant families in Catalonia, she said: "The process of change exists, the sons and daughters of immigrants receive another scale of values and the roles of women are changing too, both in the way in which they see themselves and the way in which they see their role in the host society" (Najat, 2014: 2, translation mine).

5. CONCLUSION

In *The Last Patriarch*, Najat El Hachmi

represents the complicated father-daughter relationship that is at the centre of conflict in immigrant families inhabiting contemporary Catalonia. Like the patriarch's daughter, the author herself had to emigrate from Morocco to Catalonia in the nineties. Her narrative departs from her personal experiences as a Moroccan immigrant woman. Najat El Hachmi uses her own voice as an immigrant woman to insert her novel in the contemporary citizenship discourse, and therefore, to imagine a community where Moroccan immigrant women have a voice as citizens fully integrated into modern day Catalan society.

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NOTES

¹ Two third of the immigrants living in Spain in 2002 had arrived after 1995 coming from the Maghreb, Central Africa, Latin America and, to a lesser degree, Easter Europe (Seguí, 2002:40-41).

² The author immigrated from Morocco to Barcelona when she was eight years old.

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