

MIGRANT LITERATURE

'JO TAMBÉ SÓC CATALANA' BY NAJAT EL HACHMI

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This article discusses «migrant literature» in Catalonia, looking at the particular case of Najat El Hachmi, a Catalan writer of Moroccan origin. Here we analyse her first book, the auto-biographical *Jo també sóc catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”) by examining how the migratory experience is expressed from a linguistic, cultural and gender perspective. We also compare her case with that of other writers, especially those belonging to the so-called «Francophone Maghreb» literature.

Keywords: migrant literature, Catalan literature, Maghreb literature, Najat El Hachmi.

The migratory experience, with all its social, economic and, above all, emotional and psychological complexities, has become a major literary and artistic theme, especially in recent decades. In Canada, where the social fabric is composed of different migratory layers, the term «migrant literature» was coined to describe literary works written in its official languages, English or French, recounting experiences on a personal, cultural and social level. This term is also intended to escape other labels considered to be exclusive, such as «French literature», which can be used to refer to every work written in French by people whose national origin is not metropolitan France. It refers in particular to all those arriving from the country's former colonies in Africa or the Caribbean, as well as those in Belgium and Canada. However, many writers pigeonholed under «migrant literature» reject this label, which they consider exclusive. Indeed, they feel they are turned into «second class» authors. Therefore, a few years ago, a set of artists from diverse backgrounds (including *native* French writers, as stated in an expression with racist overtones) created the concept «World Literature» or «*littérature-monde*» in an attempt to overcome these categorisations (Le Bris *et al.*, 2007).

Like France, at different stages in its history Catalonia has been a land of both immigration and emigration. In current Catalan literature, we find several examples of writers who were born in other

countries but who settled in Catalonia and chose to write in Catalan. They could fit into the category of «migrant literature», not only attending to the birthplace of their authors but, above all, because of the topic dealt with: addressing the immigrant's experience. One of the most interesting cases is that of Najat El Hachmi, author of novels and essays. She was born in Morocco but moved with her family to Vic as a girl and was raised in this Catalan city. Her first book, published in 2004, entitled *Jo també sóc catalana*¹ (“I Am Also Catalan”) is based on her migratory experience.

This article will examine the views presented in her work on the «integration» of migrant people into so-called host societies, taking into account linguistic, cultural and gender factors. The fact that the author is a woman and belongs to the Amazigh culture is not unconnected with her undivided adoption of Catalan as her writing language and her position in favour of the communities to which she belongs, or wants to belong to: the Moroccan immigrant community and Catalan native community. We will also compare her work with that of other writers belonging to the so-called «North African Francophone literature», highlighting similarities

«THE MIGRATORY EXPERIENCE, WITH ALL ITS COMPLEXITIES, HAS BECOME A MAJOR LITERARY AND ARTISTIC ISSUE IN RECENT DECADES»

¹ Najat El Hachmi's work has already been studied by academic critics; see most importantly Bueno Alonso, 2010, 2012; Guia Conca, 2007; Ricci, 2007, 2010, 2011.

and differences between migrant Catalan literature, exemplified in this work, and French-speaking literature, which already enjoys a large heritage.

■ LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AT STAKE

In the title *Jo també sóc catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”), the adjective *Catalan* not only refers to belonging to a nation, but also to a language and culture, as the author repeatedly refers to her profound knowledge of Catalan language and literature. She refers to female characters in classic works, like *Solitud* (“Solitude”) by Victor Català or Mercè Rodoreda’s novels, to characterise the people she is describing, and even seems to adopt some of these characters (or their authors) as models. Beyond the indication of possible literary influences or of a similar female genealogy to the one claimed by Virginia Woolf (2011), this display of scholastic knowledge – the aforementioned works are part of the curricula of schools and university degrees – also characterises many of the autobiographical novels of the first Francophone Maghreb writers and especially the so-called *beurs*, born or raised in France but of Arabic or Amazigh family origin. The first novel by Azouz Begag, one of the most prominent *beur* representatives, entitled *Le gone du Chaâba* (“The Child of the Chaâba”) (2001), was criticised for its description, considered by some as too complacent, of the French school system as a «social elevator» and, above all, for his enthusiasm towards classic French culture, with all the attachments it implies to a certain national and colonial conception. But this is not a unique position: rarely do French writers of «migrant literature», especially those belonging to the first generation, cite Maghreb Francophone authors as references; in turn, these same authors (who, in many cases, are not «migrants» but who write in French for historical reasons relating to the colonial and post-colonial period) also use the great French classics as models.

One of the reasons for this absence of Arab references is that many of these francophone authors belong to Amazigh and not to Arabic culture, which may explain their disaffection with literary models originating from Arabic heritage, even if it means favouring them over those of the former colony. Najat El Hachmi takes a different position because

«THE FACT THAT THE AUTHOR IS A WOMAN AND BELONGS TO THE AMAZIGH CULTURE IS NOT UNCONNECTED WITH HER UNDIVIDED ADOPTION OF CATALAN AS HER LANGUAGE OF WRITING»

she believes that unlike French, which is the colonial tongue for Maghreb people, Catalan is an «oppressed language» like Amazigh. She claims that they «are languages marginalised by certain powers», which makes her feel a greater duty to defend them. El Hachmi, who has a Degree in Arabic Language Studies from the University of Barcelona, refers to Arabic as *«la*

*llengua dels opressors en un regne on l'amazic sempre s'ha considerat de segona categoria, llenguatge oral, només, bàrbars, ens diuen»*² (p. 27), adding the fact that Arabic is the language of prophets and kings and comparing this situation with the marginalisation



Najat El Hachmi, author of novels and essays, was born in Morocco but moved to Vic with her family as a girl and was raised in this Catalan city. Her first book entitled *Jo també sóc catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”) was published in 2004, and is based on her migratory experience. The photo shows the author while participating in a panel entitled «Africans d'Europa / Africans in Europe», held in 2009 in Mantua (Italy).

² «The language of the oppressors in a realm where the Amazigh has always been considered as second-class, an oral language only, barbarians, they call us.» We shall only insert the number of the page to refer to the citations of El Hachmi's work analysed here.



In the title *Jo també sóc catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”) (left) the adjective *Catalan* not only refers to belonging to a nation, but also to a language and culture, and the author repeatedly displays her profound knowledge of Catalan language and literature.

Najat El Hachmi’s development as a writer shows us which path she has chosen as a woman: her first novel, *L’últim patriarca* (“The Last Patriarch”) (centre) is very sexually explicit, and her second novel, the last to date, is an erotic story that she describes as autobiographical, entitled *La caçadora de cossos* (“The Body Hunter”) (on the right).

suffered by Catalan, therefore considering Amazigh and Catalan to be «sister languages».

Although the author adds a nuance to this hasty analogy between Amazigh and Catalan – because for immigrants, learning Catalan is first and foremost an employment strategy –, she concludes that this «amalgamation of linguistic codes» is enriching and that «estimar totes les llengües igual»³ (p. 27). However, it seems more realistic to consider that Catalan is more often a dominant language that marginalises the social integration of immigrants from all origins; it is not only necessary to learn it, but also to speak it well, because, as is well known, accent, or certain accents, also represent a discriminatory factor.

«NAJAT EL HACHMI CONSIDERS THAT UNLIKE FRENCH, WHICH IS THE COLONIAL TONGUE FOR MAGREBHI PEOPLE, CATALAN IS AN “OPPRESSED LANGUAGE” LIKE AMAZIGH»

Jacques Derrida (1996), the famous philosopher of Jewish Maghreb origin, recounts his attempt to eliminate his «accent» and his passion for the *pure* French language, far from any regional particularity, as an unstoppable compulsion that went against his defence of being hybrid on all other planes. Although El Hachmi speaks and writes Catalan as any other educated person born and raised in Vic, her desire for legitimacy endures, as evidenced by the protest in the title: «*Jo també sóc catalana*» (“I am *also* Catalan”).

■ THE GENDER FACTOR

Immigrant women of North African origin who arrived in Catalonia in the eighties and nineties had more trouble adjusting to their new life than the men they were accompanying, or with whom they had been reunited after years of forced separation. Most of them arrived in their children’s early childhood, due to family reunification laws, and they found themselves up against a society, languages and customs that differed greatly from those of their land of origin. On many occasions they reacted by locking themselves away in their homes (on their

Najat El Hachmi shows how every woman should build her own «hybrid» subjectivity negotiating between the various opportunities and limitations that concern her, especially when she has been affected by the migratory experience. The picture shows the writer mentoring some students from the University of Lleida in 2012.

³ All languages must be loved equally.

own or their husband's choice) and not integrating into the workforce, which made it difficult for them to learn the official languages and therefore reduced their chances of finding work.

El Hachmi, who devotes the third chapter of her book to «Women from here, women from there», and compares her mother favourably with the main character of *Solitud* (“Solitude”); however, as an adult, the writer keeps a distance from the maternal role model. In novels written in French by migrant women of North African origin, this ambivalence is even more striking, because often the mother figure is seen as a poor victim, or as a «guardian of tradition» seeking to prevent her daughter from following other paths in life than her own. In the work of authors like Leïla Houari (1985, 1988), this view of the mother figure, ambiguous to say the least, even unfavourable, is accompanied by a desire for «liberation» from this role model, which could be described as feminist. By contrast, El Hachmi (perhaps also due to her generation's experiences) is extremely ironic regarding the alleged freedom of Western women. For example, she describes an exhausted young mother working a night shift, as a part of a factory's cleaning team, while at the same time studying at university, and concludes:

«*Que bé, ser una dona alliberada com les dones occidentals, rendida i sense temps per gairebé res, però alliberada al cap i a la fi*»⁴ (p. 137). The writer criticises European feminism and its exclusive «model of female emancipation»: «*El paternalisme de l'europea la impulsa a alliberar tota dona musulmana que li passi per davant*»⁵ (p. 162). However, she portrays a somewhat idyllic portrait of the «unliberated women» in her family, enjoying great power in the family environment, «*Relativament felices en el seu racó de món fet de petites alegries*»⁶ because nobody had yet told them that they were «oppressed» (p. 147). Despite this somewhat Manichaean assessment, she aspires to be a writer and if possible «a famous writer», an option she considers incompatible with the possibilities open to women subject to religion and ancient customs.

⁴ How good to be a liberated woman like western women, exhausted and with hardly any time for anything, but free in any event.

⁵ European paternalism promotes liberating every Muslim woman who happens to pass by.

⁶ Relatively happy in their little corner of a world made up of small joys.

«EL HACHMI IS EXTREMELY IRONIC REGARDING THE ALLEGED FREEDOM OF WESTERN WOMEN, AND CRITICISES EUROPEAN FEMINISM»



Najat El Hachmi qualifies hers as a «frontier generation», since she had no power to decide on her family's migration but she did experience the consequences of that decision.

Her virulent attack on European women's lifestyles ultimately shows a great discomfort she feels both for this model and that of the traditional women from her homeland. As she says, she feels «right in the line of fire» (p. 154) between these two groups, supporting this statement with an observation on her body and her sexuality: when dressing, she tries not to do so too provocatively in the eyes of some, nor too demurely or «repressed» in the eyes of the others. This attitude is echoed in the name *Not Whores Nor Submissive*, chosen by the French political association in defence of women's rights (<http://www.npns.fr/>)⁷. Najat El Hachmi's evolution as a writer shows us which path she has chosen, overcoming this dichotomy: her first novel, *El último patriarca* (2008) is very sexually explicit, and her second novel, the last to date, is an erotic story she describes as autobiographical, which is entitled *La cazadora de cossos* (“The Body Hunter”) (2011).

⁷ This association was created in 2003, aiming to defend the rights of women from «the neighbourhoods», according to their own definition, referring to big neighbourhoods in the big French cities, mostly inhabited by immigrant population. See Amara, 2004.

■ TWO SHORES, TWO WORLDS

Najat El Hachmi qualifies herself as a «frontier generation», since she had no power to decide in her family's migration project but she did suffer the consequences. The two sides of the Mediterranean, the place of origin and the host culture, are for her «two worlds» separated by an abyss, and the only way to find happiness is to search for it between these two universes through what she calls «a frontier way of thinking» (p. 14), i.e., without rejecting her origins but without enclosing herself in a monolithic identity, inherited as a result of her being brought up in the *new* world and not in the old one. We could compare this claim with the revealing title of the autobiographical novel by Sakinna Boukhedenna *Journal: Nationalité: Immigré(e)* (“Journal: Nationality: Immigrant”) (1987), in which the author bitterly denounces the lack of national identity, on a symbolic level, for these immigrants «in between two worlds».

These worlds work in a parallel, impermeable and hierarchical way (the culture of origin must be subordinated and even forgotten, in favour of the host culture), something El Hachmi complains about in her blog (<http://najatelhachmi.blogspot.com.es/>), harshly criticising the very concept of «cultural mediation». She claims that this task consists mostly in forcing newcomers to accept the rules imposed by the host society. Moreover, parents know that by bringing up their children in this society, they will «lose» them to those «other new Catalans» a phrase that refers to Francisco Candel's famous essay *Los otros Catalanes* (1964), describing immigration from other Spanish regions to Catalonia. If from El Hachmi's observations about the impossibility to reconcile the two worlds we deduce that her conception of the migration phenomenon is exclusive (in the sense that it entails adopting a worldview that excludes the original one) then this assimilation between «internal» immigration (within Spain) and «external» immigration minimises the ethnic and religious factors representing insurmountable barriers to «integration».

Finally, writing and thinking will enable the author of *Jo també sóc Catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”) to negotiate between these two cultural, religious and national conceptions that she feels as remote. She describes how, in college, «es despulla de totes les etiquetes i és només ella mateixa»⁸ sometimes even ridding herself of her

own body and becoming pure «thought» (p. 25). This unrealistic ideal of disembodied identity is tempered, however, in the same passage by her comment on how the benches at university «were not made thinking of pregnant women», a phrase that, beyond its humorous tone, refers to the obstacles that women find even in places that are apparently neutral or favourable to equality, such as school or university. Because Najat El Hachmi defines *Jo també sóc Catalana* (“I Am Also Catalan”) as a «transgendered hybrid» (p. 13), referring to the book's essay and autobiographical character, it is at the end of our reading that we realise this expression can also be applied to the author's identity, her Catalan and Moroccan identity, or even between the Western «liberated woman» and Moroccan «traditional woman». Beyond categorisations largely shaped by prejudice, Najat El Hachmi shows how every woman should build her own «hybrid» subjectivity negotiating between the various possibilities and prohibitions that concern her, especially when she has been marked by the migratory experience. ☺

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⁸ She rips off all her tags and she is only herself.