
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Arab Novel Beyond Borders: Gender Identity Construction and Diaspora in Najat El Hachmi's *The Last Patriarch*

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| ABSTRACT

Enough scholarly interest has been invested in studying diasporic literatures and discourses. However, given linguistic constraints, Moroccan diasporic texts have received little attention. Through the lens of gender theory, this paper attempts to offer some critical reflections on Najat El Hachmi's *The Last Patriarch*. It specifically looks at the ways in which gender identities are constructed and transformed within a conservative patriarchal family residing in diaspora far-flung from the homeland. It also examines how binary static identities are reshuffled, making the protagonist engage in a quest for independence and self-assertion. The complexities of immigrant identities, incorporating binary elements such as languages (Amazigh and Catalan), modernity, and tradition, allowed the protagonist to go beyond shame, taboos, and stereotypes to deconstruct the patriarchal figure. As a migrant, El Hachmi's protagonist presents a critical vision of both realities, thus taking her destiny into her "own" hands and toppling down 'the last patriarch.'

| KEYWORDS

Agency, diaspora, gender, patriarchy, sexuality.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Diaspora literature is a growing field of scholarship that opens up to various issues related to identity, memory, and space, to name but a few. It allows diasporists to voice their experiences as they are torn between their hostlands and (imaginary) homelands. The significance of memory in diaspora discourse lies in connecting roots and routes. However, it sometimes engenders ambivalent feelings towards striking a balance between holding up to roots and traditions and coping with modernity and a new identity. Thus, this literature often portrays nostalgia for a lost identity that has drifted away, finding refuge in hybridity.

This paper highlights the migrant's experience vis-à-vis identity crisis and patriarchal domination. *The Last Patriarch* tells the story of an unnamed character, a girl who is doubly subjugated as a woman and as a 'Moor.' This novel was considered a bestseller when published in 2008, and was awarded the most prestigious Catalan literary prize, the Ramon Llull. Besides, it has been translated into many European languages and has won the Prix Ulysse in France. The novel is very revealing; one can notice from the title the impact of despotic patriarchal hegemony, which might foreshadow a break from conventional gender roles and traditions. It is divided into two parts. The first part consists of thirty-eight chapters; the first is entitled "A Long-Awaited Son," and the last chapter of part one is entitled "The Call, or How Destiny Takes An Unexpected Turn." The novel's second part has thirty-nine chapters; the first is called "A Long Long Passage," and the last is "Revenge with a Vengeance."

2. Facing Two Cultures: Gender Roles, Formation, and Identity in *The Last Patriarch*

The title, *The Last Patriarch*, might evoke the end of the hegemonic and despotic patriarchal 'regime' in the family and the break from all the stereotypes and clichés deeply rooted in society and passed down through generations for ages. Najat El Hachmi starts the first chapter with the title "A long-awaited son." The first part talks about her father's childhood and how his family eagerly awaited the birth of a he-baby. The first chapters draw upon the Arab Islamic culture, lifestyle, and mentalities that are gender biased. Ironically enough, these traditions are perpetuated by women themselves:

His three sisters were women in the traditional mold, the kind that takes responsibility for the house and the family and feels innate devotion for their small brother, although they are not much older. They swaddled him, caressed him, milked the cow every morning, so he had fresh milk, and accustomed him to being massaged in almond oil from the day he was born. (El Hachmi 11)

The above passage shows how women are seen in conventional societies as subservient to the patriarchal hegemony; a woman is expected to devote herself to raising the male "heir" in a sense, be it the mother, the grandmother, or the sisters. Patriarchy is represented and epitomized by specific father figures, but it is also shaped as a form of cultural authority that separates bodies and minds into static binary identities. In fact, throughout the novel, there are many references to stereotypical images of women as being submissive, diligent, and subservient to men; "Mimoun's older sisters were honorable women who would never create problems, prudent, diligent, honest, girls who had never been known to flirt or allow themselves a single daring dance before their wedding" (42). This statement shows how women are victims of individual and shared violence and pain, child abuse, poverty, gender violence, migration, and racism. As a diasporic text, *The Last Patriarch* is, therefore, an attempt to bring to the fore the stories of aching experiences of women within /beyond borders.

El Hachmi's heroine, a rebellious daughter of the Driouch family, explores a love-hate relationship with her father, Mimoun, to make sense of her experience as the daughter of an immigrant and to retrace the story of her road to liberation from the customs and values of a traditional society. She narrates the story of her father and that of her to pin down the many influences that shaped the attitudes, identities, and views of life of two generations. The father, the patriarch, epitomizes the social, cultural, and religious norms males in an Arab Muslim society have to abide by blindly. His daughter represents all that a man like Mimoun would refuse to tolerate. The authority and reverence associated with the father figure add a solid symbolic force to this relationship and evoke the idea of control, power, ownership, and responsibility of 'honor.'

In her account, the narrator does not seek a judgment of her father as much as she tries to understand the social and cultural milieu that shaped her father's attitudes and beliefs of what a woman should be and should not be, in particular. Narrating her father's formative years, the daughter indirectly expresses her empathy with him as a victim stuck in a world of contradictions where his view of women plays a significant role. Through juxtapositions and comparisons of both experiences and formation years, the author tries to highlight the idea that they were just human regardless of all the social pressure and expectations that they faced and that they had to struggle through different views and cultures to finally find out how to lead a life of their own.

The birth of a son to the family Driouch, a patriarch and heir of their surname, is a unique event that will bring meaningful change to the household. This son will have an upbringing and formation typical of a traditionally patriarchal society. Nevertheless, as his mother thinks, the incident that marked his early childhood, being slapped by his father, will change his life forever: "We do not know how important this unusual event was in the life of Mimoun. Grandmother always says it changed her son forever" (10). This incident is symbolic; it is some rite of passage and a male cult that exposed the little child to violence, a masculine world that he should join, and which norms should be perpetuated through generations of patriarchs. He was not supposed to cry; he was meant to be tough.

The presence of another male, his brother, is a direct declaration of rivalry. This suggests that males in this society are trapped in a world of competition and are supposed to be active and energetic warriors who claim their individuality and seek domination. However, the author goes beyond this to pin down her father's psychology; his concern about the arrival of a baby boy is related to his fear of being eclipsed by this newborn. This shows his fears of separation from the matrix, the motherly body, and losing his mother's interest; his reaction directly reflects a child's turmoil when being weaned and having to belong in a masculine society. He has to embark on a journey of identity building and assume the traditional gender roles. His destiny is imposed on him by his society. In his childhood, Mimoun is surrounded by females; his mother and sisters protect him and give him love and tenderness:

His sisters protected him from his father and shielded him from the looks of envious women who would have cursed the beauty of his eyes and the deep brown mole perfectly placed above his lip. And from the winds, the sun, and endless summer afternoons. They swaddled him, hid, and kept him constantly in the shade. (12)

The author suggests that Mimoun is not yet part of a male world where patriarchy is taught and normalized; his female sisters are symbolically protecting him. His weaning is to be initiated soon as he joins the school. Mimoun's formation years introduce him

to his "natural" state of being, a man in a patriarchal society. However, the pressure he faces brings out the rebellious child in him. He is remarkable, the author thinks, and he is different! However, formation and schooling impose a set of values and convictions on him. He is being indoctrinated, and a system of hierarchical binaries is being created in his view of men and women. In this vein, Lorber claims that "gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning is taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like wondering about whether the sun will come up" (1). Thus, Mimoun is seen as a victim of his patriarchal society, and his rebellious acts are a manifestation of evil spirits and sorcery. The author explores the psychology of Mimoun's struggle; he is a simple human being who has been put in a world of indoctrination and normalization of subjective convictions. His free thinking and creativity are muted by his schooling and formation years. His first sexual initiation was symbolic of his being victimized by his society. Mimoun meets his uncle by the river, "Keep Still, Mimoun" (22). This event implies an idea of a domineering and penetrating male, his uncle, and it symbolizes Mimoun's passivity and helplessness in the face of a patriarchal society where penetration is symbolic of strength, activity, superiority, and domination. This society dominates him, but he is simultaneously confused as he is in the initial stages of discovering his sexuality.

This is reminiscent of the Beauvoirian exploration of a child's birth, formation, the experience lived, and sexual initiation. On the route to liberation, the protagonist creates a link between her and her father and shows the pressure they both have to face and the expectations they have to rise as two human beings that society separated, labeled, and categorized. Her father's experience is not a typical one. Between his life in Morocco and his life and alter ego in Spain, the new identity of Mimoun put him on a threshold where he experiences and makes sense of both cultures and realizes the subjectivity of a society's values. The author suggests that this eventually makes her father end patriarchy, though in an indirect way: "And so it was. Mimoun the Fortunate was born that day and would have the honor of bringing to end generations and generations of patriarchs destined to make the world a decent, orderly place." (6)

3. Women in Mimoun's Life: Categorization, Judgement, and Blame

Mimoun meets women from two diverse cultures in Morocco and Spain, and he continues to build his views of women through various adventurous encounters. His cultural background affects his future categorization and judgment of women. The idea of honor and shame associated with the women of his village and his experience with his cousin Fatma have marked his childhood and adolescent years. Women can be chaste and pure, but they can be prostitutes and witches, too! Good women and wives are to be obedient and passive. They should never express their sexuality or desire and should cover up themselves and devote their life to childbearing and households. Men in society have to protect and salvage the honor of their women, and women, for him, are property that men can tame and control. His adventure with Fatma makes him shape an image of an animal-like woman who enjoys intimate relationships with multiple partners, a witch, and a prostitute. He juxtaposes this idea with that of his sisters, pious and pure women who never dare look a man in the eye: "Mimoun was proud of them, especially since he had discovered that so many whores existed in the world who needed a male the way bitches or doe rabbits do. His sisters were chaste." (42)

Mimoun is obsessed with questions of chastity and the pureness of his wife. To him, she is a loyal, chaste, and pure woman who would never dare cheat on her husband. He would leave her to live and work in Spain for a while, yet she would stay faithful. His obsession with her honor, his property that he has to protect, is a source of struggle and inner turmoil. Being stuck between his convictions about his wife and his doubts torture him. He often resorts to domestic abuse to "tame" his wife and make her realize she is not in a position to challenge him or express her mind: "Mimoun's wife began to learn from such incidents that when he said to do that, she had to obey him blindly." (97)

While in Spain, Mimoun meets other women he takes for prostitutes, which are not so different from the ones he met at home. They all had to be paid to please customers. No affection or tenderness is included. He meets His boss's wife, and he believes that she is permissive simply because she dresses the way she does. The woman he takes for a prostitute engages in an extramarital affair with him, the irresistible Moor, and he takes her for an obedient sex slave but cannot put up with her right to say no to his fantasies and desires. When she rejects him, he blames her. She is the evil seducer who provoked him. She is to blame. To humiliate her husband, he lets him know he has an intimate relationship with his wife. This suggests that Mimoun is proud of his sexuality and thinks he can take revenge on a man by taking his wife as a mistress; he takes sex as a weapon that favors and empowers men.

Also, to him, a wife is her husband's property, and a wife has no sense of personal agency. So, the husband decides for his wife, her dress code, and her behavior: "If I had a wife, thought Mimoun, I would not let her out of the house" (75). In the same context, the author voices Mimoun's beliefs about married women: "If she had been his wife, she would be dead by now. He would have beaten her so hard" (79). Back home, he conjures stories about being a victim of a prostitute, and he blames her. He is the man, and vile women, witches, and prostitutes compromise to seduce and cause him harm. He shows no sense of responsibility or self-control. If a man gets involved in adultery, women always try to trap him.

Mimoun's encounters with these women mirror his ideas about his categorization of women and how he plays contradictory roles to handle the good and the bad. Isabel is a divorced woman with children who must feel "inferior" because she is divorced and whom he sees as inferior. Rosa can express sexuality and desire, thus, making them evil women according to his standards. Still, he likes to be with them since they do not say no to fantasies that his chaste wife would find outrageous and morally unacceptable. These relationships are full of disgust, fear, desire, and fascination at the same time.

Moreover, Mimoun's wife knows he is having affairs with these women. However, he does not mind that because he thinks he is a man with desire and a right to express sexuality freely and comfortably, coming from a polygamous society. He cheats on his wife, but he expects her to be loyal, and he decides that she should stop wearing the headscarf when he pleases or when she has to. His wife is subject to his changing opinions about her dress code. Mimoun's categorization of women is limited and full of contradictions, misconceptions, and judgments. For women, the concept of freedom is limited, and it is synonymous with the desire to challenge patriarchy and indulge in all kinds of immoral acts. A woman with an opinion or personality who does not necessarily have affairs but still claims her desire and is comfortable with her sexuality is a prostitute for him.

4. The Hegemonic Power of Patriarchy

"I was His." (El Hachmi 129)

The narrator and heroine is the first daughter born to the great patriarch. She is his favorite baby, whom he had always wanted. However, this baby, born in a dysfunctional family, has to assume a role dictated by the values of traditional society: "I was born with the duty to be affectionate, with a prickly mother who had been tamed from the start of her marriage" (128). Besides, the daughter's honor is the responsibility of her father and his source of worry and fear. He constantly has to make sure she is chaste and pure. Her body is not her property, and as she grows up, she learns that her relationship with her father will change because she becomes a woman. The author is aware of the underpinnings of her father's behavior and attitudes; he is not to blame since this is deeply rooted in the history of patriarchy. A woman's biology and body have long been theorized by men, shamed, and blamed. She suggests history and historicity by narrating her father's childhood and life. She evokes the idea of subjectivity and the possibility of a change via lived experiences that teach human beings about the relativity and arbitrary nature of convictions. Men and women have been subject to theorizing and can be both victims of misconceptions. In her case, it is her now that her father frames based on his values, "il s'agit de savoir ce que l'humanité a fait de la femelle humaine" (de Beauvoir 79). Her childhood and formative years, especially when she moved to Spain to live with her family, were problematic. She has been brought up with the need to be responsible for saving her family, and her father continually exposes her to content a child is not supposed to see, like taking drugs with his friend in front of her. The father grows irresponsible, disappears often, and the narrator has to go and look for him.

The narrator, having inherited a rebellious spirit like her father, takes a leading role and plays the observer, and she gets the courage to explore her world and learn the hard way. Nevertheless, unlike her father, who takes a superior position and grants himself the right to judge and categorize women, the narrator observes and tries to understand her father's character. Throughout the novel, the narrator is aware of the pressure that society's expectations put on individuals. She understands that her father is full of contradictions. He is puzzled and torn between the norms and values of two diverse cultures. His inability to decide and stick to the values of one culture affects him mentally and emotionally. His temper tantrums confuse and hurt his family, who struggle to pin down his character and attitudes that keep changing between two cultures and countries. Her confrontational relationship with her father yields no hatred or rejection since she strives to analyze her father's state of mind and sometimes shows empathy.

The narrator takes a leading stance and embarks on a journey of self-discovery, where she later explores her sexuality for the first time and continues to build her personality through her individual experiences. The teachings her mother perpetuates and the traditional values she represents are not absolute to the narrator, nor are the teachings of her father. She gets her first menstruation cycle, and this event makes her parents worry more about her dress code, behavior, friends, and outings. She has become a young woman, and her father is still responsible. However, her father's attitudes change with her, and she is banned from the space he had shared with her when they arrived. He has become stricter and controlling: "He came downstairs half naked and simply said: from now on, I do not want you speaking to any men" (221).. She thus begins to form her ideas on what love is and what sex is. However, unlike her father, who oscillates between his desires and caprices and what is morally acceptable with no sense of remorse, the daughter sometimes gets stuck and confused between the expectations of her family, especially her mother, a symbol of the guardian of traditional values, and her curiosity to discover more about herself in a different culture and society. As a result, she gets involved in an enthusiastic love relationship but cannot express her love freely or allow her lover to consume her virginity. Regardless of being under strict control by her parents, the narrator manages to engage in a long-term relationship with a man older than her. They decide on their life together, and the fact that her father rejects him does not pose a significant obstacle to her. In her adolescent years, she tried to have some sex education, something that is considered taboo in her family and culture,

and she continues to build her future life with the man she once wanted. Finally, she decides on her marriage, like her father once did, and insists on marrying the love of her life, so she decides to divorce, too.

At the same time, she never lets go of her education. She carries on her education at a time when girls leave school to marry and fulfill their marital duties traditionally: "They did not marry me off" (259). The protagonist takes her stance and insists that she takes herself for an individual and independent woman with personality, opinion, and freedom to claim and explore her sexuality. Her family somehow accepts her decision as she exposes her rebellious and risky behavior, just like her father. When unsatisfied with her marriage, she decides to leave her husband. Tired of her father's obsession with her chastity when divorced, she decides to take revenge by indulging in an intimate relationship with her uncle, mirroring her father. In this regard, contrary to Brah's point that "diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings" (193), El Hachmi's narrator still endures pain beyond borders.

Her childhood, formation years, education, and adolescence are somehow like that of her father. Both have their fixations, fears, desires, aspirations, and dreams that face the norms and expectations of a society and a specific culture. Both discover that all those norms and values are not absolute and eternal truths. Those convictions are relative and subjective to change by simply crossing the Mediterranean and heading to the other side of the world.

5. Conclusion

Najat El Hachmi presents in her novel a critical view of patriarchy via the complex relationship between Mimoun, his daughter, his wife, and his mistresses. She also shows how women are subordinated under the male hegemony in their homeland and even as immigrants. Women in the novel were portrayed differently depending on their social roles as mothers, daughters, or mistresses. Nevertheless, the subjugation turned into agency and resistance. This agency was acquired differently from one woman to another. Some were empowered because of language (mastering Catalan and being educated); others resorted to witchcraft and sorcery – to break free from the patriarchal chains. Women's oppression was also depicted via sexuality. Indeed, the latter was a form to oppress and subordinate women by linking them to shame and their bodies to taboo. As a female diasporic writer, Najat El Hachmi was able to render the diaspora experience as both a source of empowerment and freedom and, at the same time, an enclosure for women who do not know the language of the host country and feel alienated. The fact that El Hachmi used her experience as a migrant woman gave the novel authenticity and a platform to all women who want to feel integrated into their host countries and assert themselves not as second-class citizens. Indeed, diaspora paves the way for the production of new identifications, (re)identifications, perspectives, and thus new beginnings, which question authoritarian and male-centered narratives and offer women a space to tell their stories.

One potential limitation of this study is the absence of references to other works by Arab women writers in different contexts for the purpose of comparison and contrast. Such references could have been used to vet similarities and differences between these literary productions, especially given that Arab women writers often address issues of common concern. In this regard, it would have been valuable to suggest an approach for exploring this body of literature. Moreover, the ongoing turmoil in the Arab world has increased challenges faced by people on the move, particularly women. This situation underscores the need for critical analysis of gender issues that have come to the forefront. There has also been a growing emphasis on writings about women refugees, aiming to expose their traumas both in their homelands and elsewhere. In short, future research could be directed to these topical issues concerning migrant women across geographical, historical, political, and cultural borders.

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