

Inhabiting In-Between Spaces: Fractured Identities and Self-representation in Najat El Hachmi's Writings

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Abstract: This paper examines the quasi-autobiographical novel *La hija extranjera* (*The Foreign Daughter*) (2015) of Najat El Hachmi, a Spanish Moroccan writer, and argues that the fractured self portrayed in it encapsulates the experience of fractured identities and selves inhabiting in-between spaces as a result of migration. With roots in the Tamazight culture (a marginalized identity vis-a-vis the dominant Arabic in Morocco), Najat El Hachmi's unequivocal adoption of Catalan as her language enables her to articulate a severe criticism of the position of women in her culture of origin without exonerating the host society for its discrimination against migrants. In the novel, as in her essayistic writings such as *Jo també sóc catalana* (*I am Catalan, Too*) (2004) and *Siempre han parlat per nosotras* (*They have always spoken for us*) (2019), she reflects on the relationship between the self and her linguistic, cultural and gender identities. The in-between state she consciously chooses to inhabit can be seen as resulting from the process of production of identity as articulated by Stuart Hall wherein, she rejects both identities negotiating between the past and the present, the 'there' and the 'here', which are in a state of constant flux. Through an analysis of these works, this paper examines the representation of her life and that of other Moroccan women in Spain as a choice to inhabit an "in-between" space.

Keywords: Najat El Hachmi, self-definition, identity, in-betweenness, migration

I will no longer answer to you. From now on I will only answer to myself. To myself or whoever, but never again to those of you who only accept me if I am meek and submissive.
(El Hachmi, *La hija* Epigraph)

The Moroccan-Spanish writer Najat El Hachmi was born in Beni Sidel, Morocco, in 1979 and moved to Spain with her family when she was eight years old. Her early years in Morocco and her adolescence in Catalonia, where she was educated, are the markers of her hybrid identity. She started writing at an early age and consciously adopted Catalan as her primary language like Asha Miró and Agnès Agboton. Najat El Hachmi achieved recognition as a writer in 2004 with her first book, *Jo també sóc catalana* (*I am Catalan, Too*). This literary memoir addresses issues relating to identity and self-definition in the context of an immigrant's position vis-a-vis the home and the host country. Her first novel entitled *L'últim patriarca* (*The Last Patriarch* 2008), received multiple prizes, including the Ramon Llull Award of 2008 and the Prix Ulysse for a debut novel in 2009, and she was a finalist for the Prix Méditerranée Étranger in 2009. *La hija extranjera* (*The Foreign Daughter*) (2015), which we will examine in this paper, is her third book. Her most recent book, *El lunes nos querrán* (*On Monday they will love us*), has won the prestigious Premio Nadal in 2021. Her other important works include the non-fiction book *Siempre han hablado por nosotras* (*They have always spoken for us*) (2019), in which she makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal values of Moroccan society and analyses how the experience of migration sometimes provides an opportunity for women to break free of the shackles of traditions.

This paper argues that El Hachmi's works can be seen as enunciatory spaces from which she articulates views on the integration of migrant people into host societies, which intersect with linguistic, cultural and gender issues. Her quasi-autobiographical writings portray fractured selves that convey the experience of fractured identities and selves occupying in-between spaces owing to migration. She writes from the position of an immigrant about her relationship with Tamazight¹ culture (a marginalized identity vis-à-vis the dominant Arabic in Morocco) and her position in Spanish letters due to her unequivocal adoption of Catalan language and identity.² Her writings articulate the problems of self-definition in a world increasingly complicated through migration and displacement. She creates spaces for reflection and dialogue between cultures, by way of a negotiation between the past and the present, the 'there' and the 'here', characterized as being in a state of constant flux. Her works contain recurrent tropes of feminist autobiographies like the relationship between the mother and the daughter, the theme of madness, sexuality and body, and the act of writing. Through an analysis of her quasi-autobiographical novel and other autobiographical essays, this paper explores the representation of countless immigrant women like Najat El Hachmi, who intentionally choose to inhabit an in-between space. In giving voice to the experiences of Moroccan immigrant women, highlighting the sacrifices inherent to cultural integration, she defines this in-between state not as one or the other but a third space, that allows for 'border thinking'³ (2004b, 14) to emerge. As she says in a speech delivered at the Cultural Forum held in Barcelona in 2004

Eventually, you'll learn to live on the border between these two worlds, a place that can be a dividing line but which is also a place of encounter. One day you'll think yourself lucky to be able to enjoy that border, you'll think that you are more complete, more hybrid, bigger than anyone else. (2004a)

The immigrant's predicament of being caught between two worlds that work in parallel, impermeable and hierarchical ways (based on the premise that the culture of origin must be subordinated and even forgotten, in favour of the host culture) finds fictional representation in almost all her works. In her blog (<http://najatelhachmi.blogspot.com.es>), she harshly criticizes the idea of cultural mediation, which, according to her, is but a euphemism for forcing immigrants to accept the rules imposed by the host society. She describes herself as an involuntary migrant, having had no say in the family's decision to migrate but suffering the consequences, nevertheless. The two sides of the Mediterranean, the place of origin and the host culture, are for her two worlds separated by an abyss. The only way to reconcile the two is through what she defines as 'border identity', i.e., neither rejecting one's origins nor enclosing oneself in a monolithic identity, accepting the inheritance from both worlds, the new and the old. This 'border identity' is not envisaged as a merely physical one but includes a genealogy as the process of production of identity necessarily involves creating a link between the past and the present.⁴

Yo también soy catalana (I am Catalan, too) is Najat El Hachmi's first-person quasi-memoir replete with personal recollections about her struggles with identity, language, and motherhood. The reflections are triggered by an innocent question from her son, asking her if he too is Catalan. In the book, she critically examines her Catalan identity that she believed was completely internalized, and the discomfort she feels about her own history – a history and a past that she had not earlier identified or acknowledged. She describes the book in the Prologue as a "kind of trans-generic hybrid: a memoir that is not exactly a memoir, real-life experiences that seem fictitious and a bit of analysis of this life narrative that is not entirely an essay". (2004b 4) Thus, she engages with her relationship with her parents, her faith, concepts of nationality, and belongingness, all of which are embedded in the memories of her early childhood. The essay takes the form of an address in the second person and points to the breaks as well as continuities in the genealogical relationship

between her Moroccan ancestors and her son. Just as in her speech mentioned above, this memoir highlights the need to move beyond categorizations based on racial, ethnic or gendered prejudices, and to be able to inhabit the in-between space, which is ultimately bigger and better. Finally, for Najat El Hachmi, it is only through the act of writing that she is able to negotiate these two worlds. This is perhaps the reason why her life is reflected in her writings through the fractured selves portrayed in them. As she says

I see that, in fact, I write in order to overcome my own barriers, to navigate between my memories (and not only in this kind of autobiographical writing but there is a bit of me in all my stories). I confess: I write in order to feel free, to get out of my confinement, a confinement made up of my origin, my fears, the oft-frustrated hopes, continuous doubts, and abysses faced by pioneers who set out to explore new worlds. (2004b 4)

These fears, doubts and frustrated hopes are echoed in El Hachmi's third novel, *The Foreign Daughter* (published in Catalan under the title *La filla estrangera* in 2015). The novel is narrated in the first person by an unnamed adolescent girl, who has migrated with her mother to Catalonia as a child. Receiving her education in Spain, she struggles to straddle both worlds, trapped between her mother's Moroccan background and Muslim religious beliefs and the desire to find an independent identity for herself in the host society. The central storyline revolves around the daughter's struggles against her mother's impositions of tradition, behaviour according to the cultural and religious codes which clash with her desires. This sense of entrapment moves her to agree to a marriage of convenience respecting her mother's wishes in the false hope that this would both free her mother of responsibilities towards her and bring her the desired freedom. However, she is unable to fully reconcile the patriarchal impositions of her husband and the traditional role accorded to women, including that of wearing the headscarf. The alienation she faces in her home as well as the outside world deepens and leads to her mental breakdown. Finally, towards the end of the novel, she breaks free from her mother and husband and leaves her child behind with her mother. The narrator of *La hija extranjera* finds herself trapped between two cultural codes that are both alienating and finds release only when she decides not to belong to either of the spaces but to inhabit a third space consciously. The narrator's struggles with contraposed ideals of belonging, both to Spain and to the mother, reflect an immigrant's painful adaptations to Spanish cultural norms while trying to adhere to the traditions of her former home.

While Najat El Hachmi's articulations on identity need to be understood in the context of the complex history of immigration in Spain and Catalonia and the contentious nationalisms that operate there, our interest here lies in the way her writing, akin to that of other migrant writers, can be read from the perspective of recent studies on the intersection between autobiography and fiction, especially in women writers. The increasing interest in life-writing today can be attributed to diverse factors, but, as Gudmundsdottir notes, "autobiography – in its various guises – can capture and address many contemporary concerns, for example the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual's relationship with the past" (1). Even if one ignores the thorny issue of referentiality, Najat El Hachmi's novels serve as supplements to memory, an idea that is widely accepted in autobiographical studies today (Anderson, Whitlock, amongst others). This is so despite the fact that the universalization of individual experiences is done using the conventions of representation and hence, like all representations, is also 'constructed' to a large extent (Gudmundsdottir 6).

Najat El Hachmi, in her fiction, takes recourse to some of the recurrent tropes of feminist autobiography, for instance, the relationship with the mother, the reasons for choosing to write, often closely linked with breaking free from the mother, from madness, and/or

traditional female roles imposed by patriarchal models of behaviour. Feminist theories have, of course, focused on ideas on mothering and writing, and ideas about the mother and writing are strongly linked with *écriture féminine*.⁵ Autobiography offers the possibility of liberation in some sense as it is the ultimate tool for self-representation. Telling one's story is like giving birth to oneself and is intrinsically linked to claiming agency for oneself.

In Najat El Hachmi's novel, the mother is represented as an obstacle in the path of the narrator's self-definition and accepting the mother's cultural impositions come at a high cost, of losing her mind. The restoration of mental well-being is contingent on the final separation from the mother, which then provides the opportunity for self-definition. Mental imbalance, which implies a denial of self-representation, is overcome through writing. The attempt at self-representation is complicated due to her peculiar relationship with both the languages that are markers of her identity – Tamazight, her mother's language that is the language of repression and silence for her, and Catalan, the language that she consciously adopts but which too is a source of alienation. The choice of Catalan, though rooted in the contingencies of Spanish and Catalan nationalisms, suggests a cultural identification because of the marginalization of both Tamazight and Catalan in the cultural context of Morocco and Spain. Moreover, Najat El Hachmi believes that it is precisely this position of 'in-between-ness', between two languages and cultures, that allows her to adopt a nuanced view of both. As she explains in an interview

Being in between two languages forces you to leave one and put yourself in place of the other. It makes you more compassionate, which is fundamental for any writer. Living and growing up in this situation makes you see that people have different beliefs and you learn to appreciate that and live without conflicts. (Ciuccarelli 67)

In another interview, she says

I remember having to learn Spanish on the playground, after learning Catalan in the classroom, because if we didn't speak Spanish, the other kids would make fun of us. So I ended up speaking in Spanish with my siblings. Then most of us ended up speaking in Catalan or Tamazight with our children. I speak Tamazight with my mother, Spanish with my siblings and Catalan with my children. The sociolinguistic factors change over time; there are no clear and defined patterns, but rather it happens like this. (Puigtobella)

Just as in the case of the author, for the narrator of *La hija extranjera* too, the exploration of identity is related both to the language she learns outside the home as well as to the language she speaks at home with her mother. Tamazight represents her past and her mother, whereas Catalan represents the present and the possibility of freedom in the future. This is expressed in the form of an imaginary line that is inscribed on her body, dividing her into two parts. Repeated allusions to the metaphorical lines drawn on the narrator's body throughout the novel bring into focus the idea of the irreconcilably divided self. The experience of migration as a transitory situation that changes while remaining unchanged is a reality shared by both the author and her fictional narrator.

The metaphor of translation as a back-and-forth movement between languages and cultures appears recurrently in the novel. The motif of the immigrant as a translated body, transported across cultures and languages, is conveyed through the narrator's switching between languages. Both languages, the original and the translated one, simultaneously convey a sense of belonging and its opposite, a sense of alienation. This accentuates the idea of the suspended self that consciously inhabits an in-between space. While making coffee for her mother, she reflects on her inability to find an appropriate word. She thinks to herself

Teapot is not the word, neither is coffeepot. For a moment, I remained suspended in that translation. How should one call a teapot for coffee? *Zaglasht*, *abarrad*, so nuanced and

different in our-her language, and I am not capable of finding the correspondence. Suddenly, this lexical mismatch, so insignificant, so banal, has made me remember how far away I am from her, her world, her way of seeing and understanding things. No matter how well I translate, no matter how much I try to put the words from one language into the other, I will never get it, there will always be differences. Despite this, translation continues to be a sweet distraction, a tangible way, at least, to bring closer our realities, which has been useful for me since we came here. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

The protagonist narrator's struggle to find the right word and to translate between two cultures reflects her struggle to distance herself from both cultural contexts, one that represses her and the other that fails to comprehend her. The gap between the original word and the translated one alludes to the gap which she wishes to inhabit. In this way, she recognizes the breach between the two languages and cultures. Her mother's language, rooted in orality, "flies through the air without leaving a trace" and "has remained fixed on the skin of women" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). She also wonders why "there is no dictionary that can translate my mother's language into the language of here, not even to any language in the world, that I know of" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). Her first attempt to leave her mother fails as she realizes that a deeper bond connects them both and that her mother will remain a part of her, come what may.

Only with someone who is like me, who also has a mother like mine and would have learnt this foreign tongue and would have internalized it, like me, so much so that it has become the main language of my thoughts, can I speak like this, as I often do, mixing both languages. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

On the other hand, the newly acquired language and the ability to 'think' in that language accords her a new sense of identity, one that eventually causes her detachment from her mother. She declares, "I am no longer from the language of my mother" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). The ability to fluently speak and think in another language completes the process of separation from her mother. With the adoption of a foreign language, she compares her teacher in school to a second mother, "because she taught me the language of this place, the language in which I now think" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). The narrator strategically uses Catalan as it facilitates her entry into Catalonian culture. In not choosing Castilian Spanish but Catalan, she consciously asserts a connection between both languages in terms of their marginalized position. However, the ability to 'think' like a native in Catalan is still not sufficient for her as she is unable to explain her actions to people outside the family. The people she meets in the outside world fail to comprehend her reasons for marrying or her decision to discontinue her studies or for agreeing to wear the headscarf. She says

I observe myself and I see that I would like to open up completely, although it is not necessary, so that this woman understands why I do what I do or do not, I would like her to see me fully, inside out, so that she can understand my decision. But it is impossible, I cannot explain to her who I am in one word, or even in a sentence in this unexpected conversation. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 6)

The narrator, like the author, is critical of the condescending approach towards immigrants by individuals of the host society. Their well-meaning attempts at 'cultural integration' often ignore the needs of the people whom they address. This imposes certain expectations on immigrant women, without accounting for their cultural predicaments. For instance, the European women the narrator meets at the local centre, which runs courses for immigrant women, fail to understand her predicament. The predicament she faces is of leaving her home and family or staying with them. The narrator voices this in the following manner

But of course, the people who think like this do not stop to think of our solitude, they do not offer any alternative, they do not offer us, in exchange for our rebellion against our families,

an alternative place of refuge. Don't allow yourself to be dominated, rebel against the primitive and ancestral traditions of your people, run away from discrimination and male chauvinism. But if we cross the bridge, what awaits us on the other side? (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 17)

The split between two linguistic and cultural identities makes her a misfit in both. This feeling of unbelonging in both cultures at first is cause for anguish. As she says

Why are you surprised? This is the normal life, it is yours that doesn't fit in, you are the intruder. You, whose mother cleans their houses, and thankfully someone has accepted her despite the parting in the middle, the straight Riffian forehead and the headscarf. They have been generous enough with you, in accepting you. You don't have anything to complain about, as you speak their language as well as them or even better so much so that they almost forget where you are from or who you are. Almost. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

This is also expressed in the feeling of "being orphaned, expelled from language" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 4). Although the way she writes in Catalan "is impeccable, without a fault, all the pronouns in their place, punctuation, everything" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 14), she also finds herself missing her mother tongue, and hopes to "be able to belong to her mother without having to be different from the way she is" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 20). However, she gradually realizes that the hybrid space she inhabits is a better one, one that would enable her to gain a better perspective of her present and the past. Separation from the mother and her cultural heritage is essential for her to acquire an independent identity. Finally, she decides to leave her home and sets out to chart her own life. In the end, there is also the recognition of the need to accept the connection with her mother and her past, as that too is an essential part of her being. The novel ends with the decision of the narrator to write her mother's story. The hybrid space that she succeeds in occupying allows her to assume a new identity, that would acknowledge her mother's without rejecting it entirely.

I would write my mother's story to recover her, to remember her and to do justice to her because all the things I thought I had forgotten, which are related to her, I carried them within me without knowing where. I would write her story so that I could separate her from mine. I would write her story, so that I could be myself without being for her, but I could also be myself without being against her". (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 20)

The predicaments faced by the narrator of El Hachmi's novel in defining her identity resonate with the idea of what Stuart Hall defines as the production of identity. Hall argues that we need to think of identity not as an already accomplished fact but as something that is "never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Further, for Hall, identity is not "grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past" (224). Hence, for the narrator of Najat El Hachmi's novel, telling her story gives her the opportunity to constitute her identity through representation. Her identity is constructed through the reconstruction of her past as well as that of her mother's. Just as Hall argues, for the narrator too

[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power (225).

Hall concludes that "[c]ultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. not an essence but a positioning" (226). In the case of El Hachmi's narrator, her situation as a Moroccan immigrant in Spain with the religious and cultural connotation that it entails define her identity at the beginning of the novel. However, by re-working her connection to her mother (her past), she reconstructs a life that ends up being different from that of mother's. Her life experiences – of marrying a man in the hope of pleasing her mother and finding freedom, of being forced to do things that go against her inherent

self like wearing a headscarf and not continuing her studies, and finally an unwanted child – compel her to rethink her life and redefine her identity. By rejecting her mother and her child, she discovers a new place from which she can articulate a new identity. In the end, she writes her story constructing herself by simultaneously rejecting and owning her past and present.

The fractured selves presented in Najat El Hachmi's texts represent the fractured identities of immigrants caught between two sets of cultural contexts and nationalisms and postulate the notion of a 'border identity' that is neither one nor the other. It rejects the limitations imposed by both and simultaneously acknowledges and assumes both. On the one hand, she rejects nationalist projects that strictly align people to a nation-state or territory. On the other hand, she carefully avoids the nostalgia often felt by foreigners that clouds a critical reflection of traditions. This is an idea expressed by many "out-of-country and out-of-language writers", who experience a loss of the past but are able to sufficiently distance themselves due to their life experiences. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 12). El Hachmi's representations of immigrant lives in Catalonia remind us of Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity. According to Bhabha, colonial systems contain fissures that bring about their own unravelling and reconstitution in the hybrid cultures that fuse the culture of the (dominant) colonizers with that of the (marginalized) colonized. His concept of hybridity inheres in the production of the 'new', an amalgam emergent from the pleasures of contact and translation between cultures. He writes

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (25)

Similarly, the lives narrated by Najat El Hachmi force open new spaces of translation that are essentially hybrid and question the politics of nationalisms. By questioning relationships across multiple categories (languages, history) and borders (Riffian, Moroccan, Catalan, and Spanish), Najat El Hachmi uses the space of her writing to reimagine how identities are produced, which require deciphering of multiple histories, languages, and realities. By drawing upon her own experience of crossing borders, Najat El Hachmi creates fiction that is deeply autobiographical. Her nuanced portrayal of the migration experience of Amazigh people in Catalonia at the end of the twentieth century reflects the complicated realities resulting from migrations and displacements. She forwards the idea of inhabiting an in-between state as an empowering position that can free the individual subject, while simultaneously calling upon the need to construct new imaginaries with place and agency for such subjects.

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Notes

- ¹ Tamazight is a Berber language spoken in the Riffian region of Northern Morocco.
- ² Her novels make intertextual references to important figures of Catalan literature like Mercè Rodoreda, Montserrat Roig, Miquel Llorc, María Mercè Marçal, among others, thereby acknowledging the literary lineage she inherits.
- ³ All citations have been taken from the Castilian Spanish translations of the books. All translations into English are mine.

- ⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the cinematic and literary representation of Moroccan immigrants in Spain and analysis of Moroccan migrant literature, see Codina (2017), Dotson-Renta (2012), Flesler (2008), Ingenschay (2011), Murray (2017), Tauchnitz and Borst (2017), Vega-Durán (2016), among others.
- ⁵ For further discussion on feminist autobiographical practices related to gender and memory, as well as discussions of autobiographies in postcolonial contexts, see Anderson (2001), Boldrini and Novak (2017), Hirsch (1981), Smith and Watson (2001), Whitlock (2015), among others.

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