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Searching for Orgasms in the Dictionary: Language, Literature and Emotion in *L'últim patriarca* by Najat El Hachmi

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ABSTRACT

L'últim patriarca by Najat El Hachmi (2008) has been critically acclaimed for its portrayal of the difficulties faced by a young Moroccan girl struggling to reconcile her past and present identities under the authoritarian yet unpredictable control of her father. This article focuses on the triangular relationship between language, literature and emotion that underpins the protagonist's quest for independence, self-esteem and emotional maturity. Drawing on research on bilingualism and emotion, literature and emotion, and emotions and moral judgement, the article examines how these interconnecting themes are explored in the novel and their importance for our understanding of the protagonist's journey towards personal autonomy. Two classic Catalan novels, *Solitud* by Victor Català and *La plaça del Diamant* by Mercè Rodoreda, provide the protagonist both with an insight into her own situation and a way to become the narrator of her own life story, thus (it appears) taking control of her own destiny. The article argues that this is only possible thanks to her ability to express her story in a new language, to rediscover the connection between bodily sensation and emotion, and to forge a new moral identity that is no longer conditioned by that of her hypocritical father.

**KEYWORDS: NAJAT EL HACHMI; BILINGUALISM AND EMOTION;
LITERATURE AND EMOTION; CATALAN LITERATURE.**

RESUMEN

L'últim patriarca de Najat El Hachmi (2008) ha sido aclamado por la crítica por su interpretación de las dificultades a las que se enfrenta una joven marroquí que lucha por reconciliar sus identidades pasadas y presentes bajo el control autoritario y caprichoso de su padre. Este artículo se centra en la relación triangular entre lenguaje, literatura y emoción que sustenta la búsqueda de la protagonista por la independencia, la autoestima y la madurez emocional. Basándose en la investigación sobre el bilingüismo y la emoción, la literatura y la emoción, las emociones y el juicio moral, el artículo examina cómo se exploran estos temas interconectados en la novela y su importancia para nuestra comprensión del viaje del protagonista hacia la autonomía personal. Dos novelas catalanas clásicas, *Solitud* de Víctor Català y *La plaça del Diamant* de Mercè Rodoreda, proporcionan a la protagonista tanto una visión de su propia situación como una forma de convertirse en la narradora de su propia historia de vida, tomando así (según parece) el control de su propio destino. El artículo argumenta que esto sólo es posible gracias a su capacidad para expresar su historia en una lengua nueva, redescubrir la conexión entre la sensación corporal y la emoción, y forjar una nueva identidad moral que ya no está condicionada por la de su hipócrita padre.

**PALABRAS CLAVE: NAJAT EL HACHMI; BILINGÜISMO Y EMOCIÓN;
LITERATURA Y EMOCIÓN; LITERATURA CATALANA.**

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Najat El Hachmi's first novel, *L'últim patriarca* (2008), has won critical acclaim, has been translated into several languages, and has been the object of numerous academic studies. The novel narrates the experiences of a young girl born in Morocco who moves to Catalonia with her family, and has therefore drawn particular attention for its portrayal of the experience of immigration. El Hachmi's observations of the way her protagonist moves between the two cultures to which she belongs cover a broad range of themes related to identity, including questions of hybridity, power, nationality, gender and sexuality (Crameri 2014; Elboubekri 2015; Everly 2011, 2014; Folkart 2013; Ricci 2010). The focus in this article, however, is on something that could be said to precede or underlie these themes, in the sense of being a precondition for their expression: the triangular relationship between language, literature and emotion explored in the novel.

As the unnamed protagonist begins to get to know her new home in Catalonia and interact with people from very different backgrounds to her own, she also starts to learn the Catalan language and discover its associated written culture. This intellectual journey, I will argue, is also — or even primarily — an emotional journey. The protagonist endures years of misery as she struggles to grow up in a new country while still trapped by the patriarchal structures of her former home. Her authoritarian, violent and unpredictable father, Mimoun, severely restricts her emotional development by depriving her of meaningful contact with her new neighbours and schoolmates. By trying to closet her within the family, he appears to be attempting to ensure that she does not stray from the path his culture dictates for young

women. However, this isolation within a nightmarish and abusive environment only serves to plunge her into a world of despair, low self-esteem and depression. The protagonist eventually finds a way round this through reading and speaking Catalan, and it is the positive impact of this process on her emotional maturation that will be explored here.

It is tempting to draw autobiographical parallels between the novel and El Hachmi's own life, especially given that she had already revealed much of her own autobiography in *Jo també sóc catalana* (2004). For example, her reflections here show how El Hachmi herself developed a profound knowledge and love of Catalan language and literature.¹ However, my discussion will avoid making any assumptions about possible similarities between protagonist and author. Instead, this article focuses on questions of language and authorship through the prism of the 'narrator as author', that is, by examining the links between the autodiegetic narration and the process by which the protagonist learns how to become the author of her own life story.

The discussion weaves together questions of language, literature and emotion, exploring their interrelation in order to draw conclusions about their relevance for the progress towards emotional and moral autonomy made by the protagonist, and the reader's understanding of her journey. After this introduction, which goes on to set the scene for the protagonist's discovery of Catalan language and literature, the discussion is divided into three sections: on bilingualism and emotion, literature and emotion, and emotion and moral judgement. Underpinning these themes is the fact that emotions have bodily elements as well as social and cognitive components (Kövecses 2003, 189). Evidence of this occurs throughout *L'últim patriarca*, becoming (as we will see) crucial in the act of betrayal that

¹ El Hachmi does suggest in *Jo també sóc catalana* that her relationship with Catalan was a very particular one, influenced in part by her recognition of the link between its situation in Spain and the minority status of her mother tongue, Tamazight (El Hachmi 2004, 52). On the other hand, nothing in *L'últim patriarca* directly implies that the language that brought the protagonist her intellectual and emotional freedom needed to be Catalan, particularly, rather than just any language that she could make her own.

constitutes the novel's shocking denouement. It is in this physical act that language, literature, emotion and (im)morality come together to release the protagonist from the power of her father and all he represents.

The protagonist's encounters with the written Catalan language begin quite soon after her arrival in her new home, after a particularly unpleasant episode during which her father accuses her mother of having been unfaithful to him with his brother. From then on, the household is haunted by the 'poltergeist' that stands as a metaphor for the psychological damage caused by her father's unpredictable tyranny. He forces his children to denounce the pair to their grandparents, first on the phone and then by recording a cassette tape for them. The protagonist is particularly shocked that he wants her to say 'La mare ha follat amb el germà del pare', since she knows the verb 'follar' to be 'una paraula molt lletja' (178). She seeks refuge from the trauma of this incident in other kinds of words: the ones she finds first in her Catalan dictionary and then in a variety of works of Catalan literature. Neither her mother nor father have any real command of Catalan (her mother hardly even speaks Spanish), and it is therefore in some senses a language of her own, giving her access to a world that is hidden from them. Her assiduous reading of the dictionary from A to Z, as Kathryn Everly observes, provides her with 'an intellectual arsenal that separates her from her father and from the history he represents' (Everly 2014, 52). However, as well as an 'intellectual arsenal' it is also a tool for understanding and exploring emotion, because it opens up a new world of experiences that is mediated through literature. Crucially, access to this world will eventually allow her to start to address her emotional dysfunctionality.

The title of this article refers to a specific passage in the novel which is vital for understanding the relationship between language and emotion in the protagonist's passage into adulthood. This comes early in the second part of the novel, soon after the family has moved to Catalonia.

Per escapar del *poltergeist*, si no tens una senyora cridanera i baixeta com Tangina Barrons, has de riure molt, fins a sentir que tens les costelles a punt de petar, o has de plorar molt, fins a sentir que t'has buidat, o has de tenir un orgasme, que, fet i fet, també és buidar-se. Jo encara no en sabia, de tenir orgasmes, al pare no li agradava que ningú plorés i a la mare no li agradava que ningú rigués. De manera que vaig començar a llegir, paraula per paraula, aquell diccionari de la llengua catalana. Tothom deia quina nena més intel·ligent, quina nena més estudiosa, però només era per buscar una de les tres coses. (El Hachmi 2008, 181)

This sets up a clear link between the Catalan language and an intellectual understanding of emotions that is reinforced by her experience of reading literature in Catalan. As her knowledge of Catalan increases and her use of Tamazight becomes confined to the family sphere, she realises that her future lies in the new world opened up to her by being bilingual with Catalan.

The thorough knowledge she acquires of standard Catalan is reinforced by the contacts she makes at school, both with her Catalan-speaking classmates and an influential teacher who encourages her to read literature in Catalan and to attempt to write herself. She remarks that the books lent to her by her teacher were fundamental in showing her new horizons: 'Llibres que anaven més enllà de la deficiència de les paraules, que explicaven altres significats de la vida' (El Hachmi 2008, 253). As a result, in the words of Cristián Ricci, 'La narradora descobrirá que el lenguaje no es una mera herramienta neutral que representa el deseo honesto de decir la verdad, sino que también coadyuva a la examinación de las relaciones de poder que promueven los intercambios culturales, lingüísticos y de género' (Ricci 2010, 80).

Her use of Catalan also suggests a very different emotional relationship with it than with her first language, Tamazight. Not only is this the language of her authoritarian father and the patriarchal order he represents, it is also a reminder of the childhood world she had to leave behind. Catalan, on the other hand, becomes the language of school, friendships, reading and her own early attempts at writing. It also becomes the language that allows her to ‘fictionalise’ her traumas (El Hachmi 2008, 176), initially as a means of defence and then as a way of beginning to come to terms with them. As we will see, having a second language is crucial in the distancing mechanism that constitutes this defence,² in the search for alternative ways of being and behaving, and for the eventual narration of a life-story that both reflects and constructs the protagonist as an autonomous individual.

Bilingualism and Emotion

Research into bilingualism and emotion has revealed that learning another language after the early stages of childhood leads to the speaker having a different kind of emotional relationship with the new language. According to Aneta Pavlenko and Jean-Marc Dewaele, ‘Several studies indicate that in cases when a second language (L2) is learned postpuberty or even after early childhood, the two languages of an individual may differ in their emotional impact, with the first being the language in which personal involvement is expressed, and the second being the language of distance and detachment’ (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002). The proof of this difference has been noted in areas as diverse as psychotherapy (Byford 2015), advertising, and the use of lie-detecting equipment (Caldwell-Harris 2015). This section will

² In terms of the order in which she learns Spanish and Catalan, it is not clear which came first, but since Spanish is only briefly referred to in the novel I will refer to Catalan throughout as her second language (after Tamazight). This is consistent with the use of the term by linguists who work with bi- and multi-lingual subjects and employ such classifications for convenience without thereby assigning a rigid order of acquisition or importance to each language (Dewaele 2010, 3–5).

explore the relevant findings in this field and suggest ways in which they might illuminate our understanding of *L'últim patriarca*.

The principal finding of research with bilinguals whose L2 was not learned in early childhood is that they ‘experience reduced emotionality when speaking their second language’ (Harris, Gleason, and Ayçiçeği 2006, 269). Much of this research has involved studies of autobiographical memory, many of which directly address the experience of immigration, since this often entails acquiring a second language to a very high level of proficiency. As Harris, Gleason and Ayçiçeği point out, proficiency is in itself related to the level of emotionality associated with the L2, since ‘high proficiency is frequently a marker of having had exposure to emotional contexts of learning’ (2006, 274). However, if the language is acquired after early childhood, these contexts are more likely to be associated with romantic relationships and children of one’s own than with the more primordial emotions that derive from an ‘attachment to caregivers’ (273). It therefore remains the case that ‘immigrants’ childhood memories [are] more emotionally charged when described in their native language’ (270).

This emotion is evident when the protagonist of *L'últim patriarca* revisits her family home in Morocco, since it evokes strong sensations that she describes as ‘aromes d’infantesa’ (El Hachmi 2008, 275). Tamazight and Arabic words appear occasionally throughout the text,³ and these are always terms connected with family, customs and everyday life: i.e. things associated with those ‘scents’. The narrator’s use of such words probably reflects the same issues confronted by Belgian-American writer Luc Sante:

If I say, ‘I am a boy; I am lying in my bed; I am sitting in my room; I am lonely and

³ Tamazight borrows extensively from Arabic, so the Arabic terms can be regarded as part of the protagonist’s L1.

afraid,’ attributing these thoughts to my eight-year old self, I am being literally correct but emotionally untrue . . . If the boy thought the phrase ‘I am a boy,’ he would picture Dick or Zeke from the schoolbooks, or maybe his friends Mike or Joe. The word ‘boy’ could not refer to him; he is *un garçon*. You may think this is trivial, that ‘*garçon*’ simply means ‘boy’, but that is missing the point. Similarly, *maman* and *papa* are people; ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are notions. *La nuit* is dark and filled with fear, while ‘the night’ is a pretty picture of a starry field. The boy lives in *une maison*, with ‘a house’ on either side. His *coeur* is where his feelings dwell, and his ‘heart’ is a blood-pumping muscle. (Sante 1998, 261; cited in Pavlenko 2006b, 156)

Even terms that seem to refer to concrete objects (‘*une maison*’) are clearly revealed as emotion-laden words when they relate directly to childhood experience.

For the protagonist of *L’últim patriarca* there is a direct emotional link to her childhood home that is perpetuated through this kind of language as well as through personal contact with her relatives. Nevertheless, she states several times that Morocco is no longer her home and, when there, talks about ‘going home’ to Catalonia (El Hachmi 2008, 250).⁴ The emotion of these visits to her homeland is too much for her, and she is overcome with a desire to sleep, more to be spared the emotion than from the effects of the long journey (248). At the point where she begins to narrate her story, then, the ability to tell it in Catalan becomes crucial to the way these memories are relayed, without the paralyzing effect introduced by the emotional charge inherent in her first language.

A similar effect has been described in psychotherapeutic encounters in which the client — and sometimes also the therapist — is bilingual. It may be that the client has no

⁴ This is of course not an experience particular to the protagonist, or to new Catalans from North Africa. As Kathryn Woolard’s study makes clear, the feeling of no longer being at home in the place of origin is also common among migrants to Catalonia from other parts of Spain (Woolard 1989, *passim* but see for example pp. 53–4).

option but to use his/her L2, but where this is a deliberate choice, it can indicate a desire to avoid the full emotional impact of discussing the reason for which s/he has sought therapy (Byford 2015, 334). A sudden switch to the L1 therefore sometimes represents a breakthrough in treatment (Pavlenko 2006a, 21). However, as Annette Byford points out, this does not necessarily mean that use of the L2 in such situations is always a negative phenomenon: indeed it 'may allow both expression and awareness of an emotional state (such as anger) which the other language does not' (Byford 2015, 335). Byford's description of the L2 as 'the language of an observing ego' seems particularly pertinent to *L'últim patriarca* (Byford 2015, 336), since the narrator exhibits a strong sense of self-awareness but nevertheless refrains from judging her former self. By this stage, the narrator is able to perform an act of 'triangulation': 'In psychoanalytic language triangulation interrupts essential egocentricity, allow[ing] space for thinking about self, and for the holding of ambiguity' (Byford 2015, 344). This is not surprising since, as Byford remarks, there is a strong similarity between the psychoanalytic concept of triangulation and the way that bilinguals conceptualise their bicultural experiences. She quotes Eva Hoffman:

A voice, almost unconscious, keeps performing an inaudible, perpetual triangulation. [...] Nothing here has to be the way it is [...] there is another place — another point at the base of the triangle, which renders this place relative, which locates me within that relativity itself. (Hoffman 1989, 170)

In a sense, the first person narrator of *L'últim patriarca* occupies this 'other point', perpetually balancing and relativising her Moroccan and Catalan selves.

There is no hint in the text as to the position in time of the narrator in relation to the closing events of the novel, but this is not an impediment to the reader understanding that the

story narrates the process by which the protagonist becomes capable of telling it. The protagonist's mastery of Catalan, which we see develop over time through her educational and personal experiences, culminates in her ability to express as a narrator those things that seemed inexpressible while living through them. First of all, it allows her to maintain a critical distance when talking about her father's early life, before she was born. This is made evident through the parodic tone in these chapters (an example of what Bakhtin calls 'another's speech in another's language' [Bakhtin 1981, 324]) through which the narrator mocks the assumptions of the patriarchal society into which Mimoun was born. Narrating these things in a new language allows her to be critical of a society that still has an emotional pull on her because of her childhood memories.

It also seems to allow her a sense of critical distance on her own personal problems. We see this, for example, in her conversations with the teacher who facilitates her access to Catalan literature, in which she is able for the first time to talk about her struggles with her family and her own developing self-awareness. She also explores with the teacher her ideas about love, 'de què era i què no era, de com se sabia, de com s'aprenia [...] Tot amb poemes i cançons' (El Hachmi 2008, 269). As with her reading of the dictionary, she is able to explore what seem forbidden and dangerous things from an intellectual rather than an emotional perspective.

Nevertheless, her body is largely disengaged from this process — there is little actual laughter or crying, and only shameful, hidden orgasms (El Hachmi 2008, 206). It is still her connection with her childhood home that can most easily provoke a bodily response (for example, through its 'aromes'), and it is significant that one of the forms this takes is a sore throat, i.e. a hindrance to the use of language. 'Jo faig com l'àvia, que em poso malalta quan hi ha grans emocions pel mig, però no em baixa la tensió, només tinc angines' (El Hachmi 2008, 276). It appears that the protagonist can speak of emotion only when she cannot feel it.

When she is in danger of being overwhelmed by feelings, her body responds by producing a ‘nus a la gola’, as if taking preventative measures to protect her from the damage that would result from trying to articulate these emotions in Tamazight (El Hachmi 2008, 275). Perhaps this is also an indication that her capacity to express herself in Tamazight is diminishing as Catalan becomes her preferred means of communication.

Catalan, on the other hand, is a more ‘disembodied’ language: a language that does not generally ‘stir or evoke’ (Pavlenko 2006b, 187). This does not mean that it will never have the capacity to do so, but during the years narrated in the novel, Catalan is mainly associated with intellectual enquiry and Tamazight with affective responses. There are exceptions to this, for example when the protagonist briefly finds a (male) best friend who makes her laugh and lessens her reliance on her Catalan dictionary (El Hachmi 2008, 252). Friendships such as this, and the ‘triangle parfaite’ she later forms with two girls from school, hint at deeper personal relationships lived through Catalan that did produce affective responses, but these are curtailed by her father’s jealousy and are therefore associated in her memory with pain as much as with pleasure (El Hachmi 2008, 273). The older narrator, with a clear proficiency now in Catalan, is able to use the language in order to put a distance between herself and her childhood home in the first part of the novel, but nevertheless these more recent memories that were originally encoded in Catalan are still likely to have a direct emotional effect (Pavlenko 2006b, 179).

It is significant that the emotional numbness that is clearly a symptom of clinical depression continues even beyond the point where the protagonist has become proficient in Catalan — enough, at least, to start using the language for her creative writing and to abandon her obsessive reading of the dictionary (El Hachmi 2008, 267, 274). A new language on its own is not sufficient to release the protagonist from the damaging relationships into

which she has become trapped. It is here that the link between literature and emotion becomes crucial, as will be explored in the next section.

Literature and Emotion

As with bilingualism and emotion, there is much scholarly interest in the relationship between literature and emotion — not just within literary studies but also from a more psychological perspective — that can also shed light on *L'últim patriarca*. In reviewing research carried out by psychologists, Mar et al list a number of interesting phenomena observed in different experiments concerning the way we select and react to literature, as well as the emotional effects it can have on us, during and even after reading (Mar et al. 2011). For example, our choice of reading material is very much influenced by both our emotional state at the time of choosing, and our expectations as to the likely emotional effect of a particular text (819). On the other hand, loneliness does not appear to prompt people to read more (821), which suggests that our protagonist's voracious reading is likely to be more than a mere substitute for human company. Since literature has been shown to allow readers to exercise their capacity for sympathy, identification and empathy, the emotional 'work' the protagonist does as a reader presumably involves an active dialogue with the text rather than passively receiving comfort from it (822–4).

Research shows that the emotional 'priming' that results from reading can result in cognitive, perceptive and behavioural changes (829). However, even if a text might seem likely to prompt a certain reaction, these changes are hard to predict and are generally 'idiosyncratic', precisely because the emotional engagement of the reader is so complex and individual (Djikic et al. 2009, 16). The process may result in short-term transformations in personality, and even long-term effects in 'readers engaged in deeply experienced readings of texts'. (Mar et al. 2011, 829–30). This confirms — as is strongly suggested in the novel itself

— that reading has the capacity to bring about profound changes in attitude and behaviour in highly-engaged readers such as the vulnerable teenage protagonist of *L'últim patriarca*.

Given, then, that there is 'evidence that our responses to literary narratives give us practice feeling and identifying various emotions' (Mullin 2011, 103), it is not surprising that the protagonist of *L'últim patriarca* would rely so heavily on her reading in a world that robs her of other avenues of genuine emotional engagement. However, the effects go beyond this experiential benefit. Since 'literary works can give us very fine-grained models for emotion', they can also help us to develop our emotional intelligence, both in terms of our empathy for others and our understanding of our own emotional states and reactions (Hogan 2011, 68–9). The depressive numbness suffered by the protagonist is not actually a barrier to this, and may even intensify the effects; an experiment by Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, and Peterson using a short story by Anton Chekhov showed that 'the evocation of emotions was particularly strong for individuals who were habitually avoidant in their attachment style, and who usually reported diminished emotionality' (Mar et al. 2011, 830; experiment reported in Djikic et al. 2009).

The protagonist of *L'últim patriarca* is unable to talk to her family, or later her husband, about her reading because the cultural traditions to which the works belong are alien to them. This means that she has limited opportunities to experience the kind of 'emotion-sharing dialogue about [...] reading' that facilitates the 'recalibration of our own responses in interaction with the responses of others' (Hogan 2011, 303). As Patrick Colm Hogan explains, this can be dangerous when it leads to the formation of unrealistic expectations about the world based purely on reading, as in the case of Emma Bovary's misunderstandings of the reality of romantic love (Hogan 2011, 287–303). It is therefore important that she does at least have someone with whom to discuss such matters: the teacher who shares with her 'lectures de poemes que em van dir ets tu, de qui parlem, ets tu' (El Hachmi 2008, 253).

Nevertheless she does seem to be prone to a dangerous idealisation of the power of love, as we see when she meets her future husband, the ‘cavaller [...] que et salvaria de tot, fins i tot de tu mateixa’ (287). She is blinded by his protestations of undying love into thinking that he will make a good husband (289, 291).

Although the protagonist reads avidly and from a wide range of world literature, two particular Catalan novels stand out as crucial in her development of a more critical emotional awareness: *Solitud* by Victor Català (the penname of Caterina Albert) and *La plaça del Diamant* by Mercè Rodoreda. Brad Epps’ insightful comparison of these two texts, incidentally, also explains their relevance to the protagonist of *L’últim patriarca* (Epps 2002). The two women at the centre of the novels ‘struggle with men that, far from alleviating their loneliness, fill them with feelings of emptiness, pain, fear and even disgust’ (Epps 2002, 23). They throw themselves into domestic work, but this cannot save them from the emotional effects of realising ‘their (in)significance: both come close to madness, [...] both contemplate suicide’. The protagonist of *L’últim patriarca* compares her mother directly with these two women — la Mila of *Solitud* and Colometa of *La plaça del Diamant*. These references call attention to her mother’s quiet resignation to her fate and her constant domestic toil, but also to her own reasons for marrying young and her rapid realisation that she has become just as trapped with her husband as she was with her father.

The parallels continue: Epps points out that both la Mila and Colometa ‘experience an excruciatingly critical moment of clarity that brings them full circle and that an extensive humanist tradition understands as self-awareness’ (23). The protagonist’s mother experiences such a moment when she finally rebels against her husband’s demands that she hand over the housekeeping money so that he can enjoy life with his mistress. Instead she gives him an ultimatum: her or me. The narrator tells us ‘Jo no em vaig creure el que sentia, però era la meva mare que parlava, era la Mila que s’havia afartat de netejar capelles i relíquies, la

Colometa que fugia de tot per trobar-se' (El Hachmi 2008, 222). Her own moment of self-awareness comes at the end of the novel when she realises that she cannot rely on her husband to give her the life and happiness she deserves — ‘el destí me l’havia de fer jo’ (324) — and then decides to act on that realisation.⁵

Emotions and Moral Judgement

The novel ends with the protagonist’s decision to rid herself of her father and everything he represents by an act of rebellion so shocking no one could ever speak of it again — an idea that comes to her after reading about deep family secrets in Mercè Rodoreda’s *Mirall trencat* (El Hachmi 2008, 316, 331). The act itself is to deliberately set up a scene where her father will see her having sex with his younger brother, whom he has hated all his life. In the event, this turns out to be anal sex, which is significant as references to this run throughout the novel, including a scene where her father, as a young boy, was abused in this way by his own uncle (32–4). For the protagonist, this finally results in the orgasm that rids her of ‘the poltergeist’: that is, the damaging psychological influence of her father.

This act, which is of course unspeakably shocking to her father, is also immoral according to other established codes: the generalised prohibition of incest, for example. And yet, it seems to constitute a necessary step if the protagonist is to establish her own moral framework, since she cannot rely on the one her father tried to pass down to her in such a hypocritical way. In order to do so, she will need to have full command of the normal range of emotional responses, since there is a clear link between emotion and the capacity to make moral judgements. Without empathy, guilt or shame, for example, it would be hard to decide

⁵ Epps’ chapter on *Solitud* and *La plaça* also highlights the way that their authors ‘grappled with the relations between literature, orality and community, and produced texts that have been read as testimonies to the “vitality” of the language’ (Epps 2002, 21). This statement could also be applied in its entirety to *L’últim patriarca*.

that it would be the right thing to do to avoid causing emotional or physical pain to others (Horberg, Oveis, and Keltner 2011).

Moreover, according to William E. Lyons, an emotion necessarily involves ‘an evaluation of some object, event or situation in the world about me in relation to me, or according to my norms’ (cited in Robinson 2005, 12). This means that not only are emotions the basis of judgements, judgements are also one of the components of emotions.

Nevertheless, emotions are also physiological and very immediate, producing a complex combination which appears to be possible only because they are generated according to pre-existing schemas. As Jenefer Robinson explains, ‘An emotional response is a physiological response initiated by a non-cognitive affective appraisal which evaluates the world instinctively and automatically in terms of my wants and wishes, my goals and interests’ (Robinson 2005, 114).

The protagonist of *L’últim patriarca* has no framework for developing autonomously her own wants and interests: she has no sense of self and no personal moral code. It is therefore not surprising that she is unable to experience normal emotional responses and — importantly — the bodily effects that accompany them. The emotional numbness associated with her depression could only be dispelled, the narrator says, by laughing, crying, or orgasm, all of which have obvious physical manifestations. Ironically, though, this is facilitated by achieving command of a language with fewer emotional resonances, since her first language only allowed her access to painful and controlling forms of emotion. The very ‘bodily’ orgasm at the end is therefore actually the culmination and fulfilment of a process based around language. However, there is no sound associated with the act: it is pure physicality. If there is any emotional release for the protagonist of *L’últim patriarca*, it happens in the blank space at the end of the last chapter, and constitutes a latent possibility that leads us back full

circle to the beginning of the novel and the realisation that only now can she begin to narrate her own story.

In his exploration of literature and emotion, Patrick Colm Hogan stresses that reading promotes empathy, and generally distracts the reader from egotistical preoccupations (Hogan 2011, 67–9). In fact, he goes as far as to argue that ‘In real life, most of our activities and interactions either are egoistic or have an egoistic component. In contrast, our experiences of literary emotion are almost entirely empathic’ (68). Given the evidence that deep engagement with reading can alter personality traits, it is plausible that a significant engagement with literature would manifest itself in an improvement in the capacity for empathy, as noted in the previous section. However, if we accept this premise, there seems to be a paradox where the protagonist of *L’últim patriarca* is concerned. It may well be partly empathy for women like la Mila, Colometa and her mother that motivates her to act to improve her own situation, but it appears that what she has learned through literature is that she must put her own needs first no matter what damage this might do to others — including her mother.

At first glance, then, it would appear that her behaviour might be labelled egoistic, and this is indeed the case, although not in the predominantly negative way that the term is normally defined. Rather, in Freudian terms, what we are witnessing is the start of the emergence of a more autonomous ego. The moral code that shapes the protagonist’s super-ego has been perniciously influenced by her father’s warped ‘morality’,⁶ so she must learn to assert her ego over this super-ego if she is ever to regain a sense of psychological wellbeing. This will mean that she is not constantly trying to measure up to an ego-ideal that has been shaped in the image of her father’s irrational expectations. The orgasms she experiences with her uncle are necessary in this process because ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego’

⁶ Freud defines the super-ego as ‘a special agency in which [...] parental influence is prolonged’ (Freud 1974b, 146).

(Freud 1974a, 26). Through the series of repeated orgasms, the ego at least momentarily overpowers the super-ego, signifying — it seems — the beginning of a new phase of psychological healing and personal autonomy: the emergence of an ‘I’ with her own moral code but also her own libido.

The resulting novel may therefore have little to tell us about normative morality, given the shocking ending and the lack of information as to how the protagonist might have gone on to generate her own moral compass after this explosive rejection of the one she had inherited. Nevertheless, to use John Gibson’s term, *L’últim patriarca* is a narrative founded in a strong sense of ‘ethicism’:

Ethicism [...] casts literature’s ethically relevant activity as residing in its ability to bring to light the structure of our cultural practices and the values, beliefs, and norms that sustain them. It assesses literature’s ability to offer a purchase on kinds of human experience by bringing to clarity the cultural space in which they take place and against the backdrop of which they make sense. (Gibson 2011, 84)

L’últim patriarca is most certainly a complex narrative of the kind that Mar et al deem most likely to effect some kind of transformation in a reader (Mar et al. 2011, 829). In reading the novel, we ourselves gain an insight into the way the protagonist might have been changed by reading *Solitud* and *La plaça del Diamant*, given the similarities that I highlighted earlier using Epps’ analysis of these two novels. Furthermore, through the work of our own affective imagination, we come to understand the protagonist’s emotional numbness as the only possible protection against a flood of powerful feelings that would otherwise overwhelm her. It later becomes clear that even this has failed, at the point where her pain and self-loathing has become so intense that she decides eternal sleep is the

preferable option (El Hachmi 2008, 314, 316). When even this suicide attempt is not enough to effect more than a fleeting change in her father's behaviour, and she has nothing left to lose, complete separation becomes the only option no matter how traumatic the process might be (316).

Conclusion

What we see in *L'últim patriarca* is the narration of a process by which the protagonist 'reroute[s] "the trajectory of feeling"', to borrow the words of Eva Hoffman, partly through making the transition to being a fluent Catalan speaker (Hoffman 1989, 269; Pavlenko 2002, 53). That she is able also to use the written language to a high standard is particularly significant. In contrast with the spontaneous orality of her encounters in Tamazight, when she begins writing in Catalan she enters the realm of the translingual author, in which 'no utterance can be automatic' (Kellman 2000, 30). Narrating her life-story in Catalan appears to allow her to achieve what Steven Kellman calls 'emancipatory detachment' (2000, 28). This does not mean the protagonist feels no sense of loss at the fading relevance of Tamazight as her first language, but it does become a necessary part of learning to flourish in a new environment and developing a 'narrative sense of self' (Goldie 2011, 9). In order to do so she must realise her own capacity for agency and take ownership of her actions.

In this respect, it could be argued that El Hachmi's second novel, *La caçadora de cossos* (2011), actually continues where *L'últim patriarca* leaves off. This is because it narrates the process by which a woman who appears to have free agency as a sexual subject slowly learns to open herself up to emotional attachment, a process that is once again played out both through the body and through language. She has been seeking sexual pleasure wherever she can find it, believing that romantic love cannot bring the same satisfaction she

gets from being fully in control of her own desires. The first-person narration begins with a fixation on the body, in the form of descriptions of sexual encounters and the physical actions the protagonist performs in her work as a cleaner. Gradually it introduces a ‘psychotherapeutic’ relationship with a writer for whom she cleans (which functions in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Carmen Martín Gaité’s *El cuarto de atrás*). By the end of this talking cure, she is ready to accept the possibility of romance and genuine reciprocity of feeling.

The comparison with *L’últim patriarca* perhaps reinforces something that we already know at the end of the first novel: that the protagonist is ‘released’ but not ‘healed’ in the moment when she orgasms with her uncle (how could she be, when the action is so perverse?). It is as if in order to convince herself that she is not in fact ‘la pitjor persona que es podia ser en aquest món’ (El Hachmi 2008, 314) she has to behave first as if she were. The crucial element is that of choice: she chooses for once to do something ‘bad’ rather than trying to please others and have them nevertheless insist that what she has done is wrong. The narration of her life story from a point after this choice has been made then opens up the possibility of true healing, but it is still only a possibility and not an accomplished reality. Indeed it will not become a reality until, like the protagonist of *La caçadora de cossos*, she learns to trust and connect with other people once again — this time, not through literature, but in life.

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