

# Life in Translation: Najat El Hachmi<sup>1</sup>

A vida em tradução: Najat El Hachmi

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## Introduction

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Candel and Cuenca (2001, p. 136) forecast that a generation of diasporic writers would emerge in Spain. Their prevision has been clearly fulfilled: this is the case of Najat El Hachmi, who belongs to the first Catalan generation of diasporic authors, like Saïd El Kadaoui, Laila Karrouch and Mohamed Chaib, all of them based in Catalonia (Pomar-Amer, 2014, p. 3) – a trend which was initially promoted by the dominant cosmopolitan discourse (Pomar-Amer, 2014, p. 7).

El Hachmi was born on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1979 in Beni Sidel (Morocco). At the age of eight, she immigrated with her family to Catalonia, an autonomous community located on the far northeast of the Iberian Peninsula. Some years later, she studied Arabic Literature at the University of Barcelona. However, she began writing when she was 12 years old and has continued ever since. She has published four works: *Jo també sóc catalana* (2004a)<sup>3</sup>, *L'últim patriarca* (2008)<sup>4</sup>, *La caçadora de*

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<sup>3</sup> Not translated yet.

<sup>4</sup> Translated into ten languages. For instance: El Hachmi, N. (2010). *El último patriarca*. Barcelona: Planeta. Trans. by Rosa María Prats; El Hachmi, N. (2011). *The Last Patriarch*. London: Serpent's

*cossos* (2011)<sup>5</sup> and *La filla estrangera* (2015)<sup>6</sup>, and some short stories. In 2008, she won one of the most prestigious awards in Catalan letters, the Ramon Llull prize, for her novel *L'últim patriarca*. Her work is considered diaspora literature and is guided by her living and writing at the intersection of four cultures (Moroccan, Amazigh, Catalan and Spanish). Najat El Hachmi resorts to writing in order to strengthen her identity, finding and freeing herself from her own seclusion, “made of certificates of origin, of fears, of oft-broken hopes, of continuous doubts, of abysses of pioneers exploring new worlds” (2004a, p. 14; my translation).

## Meanings and Implications of the Border

El Hachmi lives and understands the border as a space for public intervention: on the one hand, she denounces the calamity and fatigues that Moroccan migrants experience before, during and after the migration process; on the other hand, she challenges those discourses emerging from the dominant powers that subalternize immigrants. In fact, she denounces what she calls ‘ethnic pornography’, a tendency that highlights some aspects of the migrant population that they would consider ridiculous in their countries of origin (Roglan, 2007). Moreover, she considers the border as a legacy and uses her position and intimacy within as a political tool that enables her to set herself up as a referent for the next generation (Pomar-Amer, 2014, p. 35).

Ultimately, the border is for her both a dividing line and a place of encounter: “Finally, you will learn to live at the border of these two worlds, a place that can be division, but also encounter, meeting point. One day you will think yourself fortunate in enjoying this border, and you will discover yourself more complete, more hybrid, more immense than anybody else” (2004b; my translation).

## Border Identity

It is obvious that the contemporary globalized world is characterized by the encounter of cultures. It is also clear that cultures sometimes clash, like in the picture from the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in which we can see two female beach volleyball players at the net: on the left, an Egyptian player wearing long leggings and a hijab; on the right, a German player wearing what we consider the ‘normal’ apparel for playing beach volleyball<sup>7</sup>.

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Tail. No data available on the translator.

<sup>5</sup> El Hachmi, N. (2011). *La cazadora de cuerpos*. Barcelona: Planeta. Trans. by Ana Rita da Costa; El Hachmi, N. (2013). *The Body Hunter*. London: Serpent’s Tail. Trans. by Peter Bush.

<sup>6</sup> El Hachmi, N. (2015). *La hija extranjera*. Barcelona: Planeta. Trans. by Rosa María Prats; Not translated into English yet.

<sup>7</sup> Photo attribution: Viejo, Manuel (08/08/2016). La interculturalidad de los Juegos retratada en una foto. *Verne (El País)*. Retrieved from [http://verne.elpais.com/verne/2016/08/08/articulo/1470667537\\_816047.html](http://verne.elpais.com/verne/2016/08/08/articulo/1470667537_816047.html)



However, cultures do not always clash: they also merge and blend, as we could see in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games as well. For instance, two athletes, Ilias Fifi<sup>8</sup>, who illegally entered Spain hidden under a lorry, and Abdelaziz Merzougui<sup>9</sup>, who reached Spain in a “patera” after crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, were representing Spain, their host country. Clearly, this situation also takes place in other spheres of life, like in the world of literature.

This is the case of Najat El Hachmi, who writes and thinks in Catalan, as she says: “They all thought in their mother tongue. I was the exception” (2004a, p. 47; my translation). Afterwards, as El Hachmi admits, noticing that her inner discourse was Catalan implied a turning point in her life, since she realized that she was no longer the same person who reached Spain at the age of eight. She admits that confusion prevails in her life due to a lack of a reference point: “I

<sup>8</sup> Ruiz, Patricia (14/07/2016) Entré a España en los bajos de un camión para mejorar mi vida. *El Diario*. Retrieved from [http://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/ENTREVISTA-Ilias-Fifa\\_0\\_536497043.html](http://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/ENTREVISTA-Ilias-Fifa_0_536497043.html)

<sup>9</sup> [No data available on the journalist] (12/12/2010) Merzougui, un campeón de Europa que llegó en patera. *La Vanguardia*. Retrieved from <http://www.lavanguardia.com/deportes/otros/20101212/54086601533/merzougui-un-campeon-de-europa-que-llego-en-patera.html>

had no reference point, nobody who tells me: don't worry, it's normal that you feel from two places at the same time, that you have two mother tongues, even though one is adopted. We were the first ones, there were no referents" (2004a, p. 47; my translation).

As it is widely known, "[n]o one today is purely *one* thing" (Said, 1993: 407). For this reason, language, and consequently translation, has become crucial as means of understanding. In this sense, it is obvious that "[y]ou cannot translate from a position of monolinguist superiority" (Spivak, 1993, p. 195). This is precisely what El Hachmi's works show: they display life as a continuous translation and mediation process between cultures and languages.

Taking *L'últim patriarca* (2008) as our starting point, El Hachmi approaches the (im)possibility of translating certain situations because they would not have the same meaning in the target language. The novel tells the story of a Moroccan who immigrates to Spain, a sometimes despotic patriarch who enters into conflict with his daughter, who breaks with the traditional values of the old country to adapt to the new, modern culture in which she finds herself. For instance, she recounts the time when her mother was pregnant and she had to miss school in order to accompany her to the doctor and act as an interpreter:

There were some issues that I could not convert from one language to another, that I didn't want to convert from one language to another. I didn't understand yet why so many women from there explained those things to me. When was the last time your mother had her period? And I already knew what the period was, but I had never talked about that with her. When did she get it for the first time? At 16, better, so I will live peacefully until 16. When did she have sexual relations for the first time? My goodness, my goodness, I wanted to flee from all that, I don't want to know all those things, and much less having to translate them into a language in which there was no word I know for sexual relations apart from swear words. I couldn't run and the midwife gazed at me with her red nails on the table, go on, come on, ask her. Mother was staring at me and said what, what did she ask, and I would have liked to melt, all at once, and that they themselves understood each other. I couldn't say fuck, no. I couldn't say when was the first time father shagged you? Screw? No. I tried to find a euphemism. How old were you when you slept with father for the first time? And I didn't look her in the eye as I told her; she said, also very quickly, *we married when I was 18 years old*. That's all. (2008, pp. 220-221; my translation; my emphasis)

Here, it is clear that word-for-word translation would have implied a clash of cultures. Therefore, the narrator adopts an in-between strategy (Tymoczko, 2003; Spivak, 1993; Simon, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2011; Cronin, 2000; Wolf, 2000, 2008; Snell-Hornby, 2001; Mehrez, 1992). This strategy also implies the rewriting of cultures as a successful tool for understanding. According to Vidal Claramonte, the last sentence, "we married when I was 18 years old", entails both moving from one culture to another and from one generation to another (2012, p. 244): it is the translation of a translation, a re-translation.

Another example of these in-between and in-the-third-space (Bhabha, 1994; Wolf, 2000) translation strategies can be found when the mother goes to the

school to collect her children's marks. Usually, it used to be the father who did it, but she suspects that her husband is interested in the teacher. In this case, the narrator acts again as a mediator:

Until mother got tired of all that and said, this year I am going to collect your marks, even yours [...]. I was serving as a translator, as always. Mother said tell her that she is a bad whore and to leave my husband in peace once and for all, and I was smiling and said mother says that, since she the one spending more time with her children, it is better that she collects the marks and, besides, she was looking forward to meeting you. Well, I would rather talk directly to your father, it seems a little strange to me that you translate the report to your mother, don't you think so? Of course, you would have liked him to come, said mother without waiting for my translation, you prick, you don't even bother hiding it. She says father has too much work to do and couldn't come, but that she relies on me. B, A, B, A, she shows interest, that didn't have a translation and I said nothing, that she says everything went well. Only C in Gymnastics and that it would be advisable for her to do some out-of-school activity, particularly English, which we don't teach her and she has a gift for. Mother said OK, OK, which meant no way, only because it was the other who had suggested it. (2008, p. 267; my translation)

Clearly, this is a highly embarrassing situation. Again, what is remarkable here is the idea of translating as living: she finds herself in the confluence and interstice of four cultures and proves that it is possible to survive there. In this sense, she defines herself as an in-between step and considers herself part of a border generation (2004a, p. 13).

Her last novel, *La filla estrangera* (2015), tells the story of a young girl who was born in Morocco and grew up in Catalonia. El Hachmi addresses the complex cultural, social and personal reality that migrating brings with it. The narrator claims that translation does not always convey difference, even though it is obvious for her that translation is a solid approach:

No matter how much I translate, no matter how much I try to render words from one language into another, I will never succeed, there will always be differences. Nevertheless, translating remains a sweet amusement, at least a tangible way to want to bring closer our realities, which has been of assistance to me since I came here. (2015, p. 18; my translation)

On that basis, El Hachmi reflects on the fact that she has quite often needed translation to live. However, translation is not enough for those belonging to the border generation. It is due to the fact that translating is not simply replacing one word with another. Quite on the contrary, it goes much further: translating today is culture (Bassnett, 1980 [2014]), power (Foucault, [1976] 1992; Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002) and ideology (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990), and the border generation and hybrid writers have experienced it in the flesh. Also, for this reason, El Hachmi is aware of the multiple physical and metaphorical borders delimiting her world: within her family, with the public sphere, between cultures, with sexism, etc. (Vidal Claramonte, 2012, p. 243). According to Pomar-Amer, there are three kinds of boundaries: the geographical, the chronological and the

phenotypical borders (2014). First, the geographical border is not only related to demarcating the limits of a given area: “It also legitimizes the distinctiveness of the entities that are on either side. As a result, a distinctive behaviour is anticipated for those who have crossed it as if this crossing implied the incorporation of the difference that the border sustains” (2014, p. 47). Second, the chronological border has to do with the spatial displacement that any migration implies and the landmark it sets in time. Then, according to the author, “the restoration of past events requires the mediation of memory (2014, p. 48). Finally, the phenotypical border implies “underlying notions of whiteness and Christianity that are still very present in the collective understanding of Catalanness” (2014, p. 49). In the face of it, it follows that second-generation migrants will still be subjected to the phenotypical border, either by their last name or their physical features, for instance.

In spite of all these frontiers, El Hachmi opens her last novel with a remarkable statement of intention: “Never again will I be for you. From now on, I will be for me. For me or for whoever I want, but not for any of you who want me biased, divided” (2015, p. 11; my translation). Here it seems obvious that the author argues that it is possible to live in the border generation. But not only that, she claims that all these physical and metaphorical boundaries do not limit her world: quite on the contrary, they complement each other and enable her to adopt a border thinking, which “is useful to understand two different realities, a way of doing, acting, being, feeling, loving, a way of seeking happiness between two worlds” (El Hachmi, 2004a, p. 14; my translation).

## Conclusion

According to Duch, if living is speaking and speaking is translating, then living is translating (1998). This is an idea that El Hachmi seems to take for granted. Nevertheless, nowadays we should not understand translation as a simple replacement of words, but as rewriting and as cultural approach. Certain situations do not mean the same in two different languages and cultures, and neither do words because, as Vidal Claramonte reminds us, “un beso no es un kiss” (2015). Words incorporate cultural resonances and reverberations and nobody realises more fully than hybrid writers because, after all, they are in permanent translation (Niranjana, 2002, p. 57). Likewise, they are not “identity as being”: quite on the contrary, they are “identity as becoming” (Hall, 1993, p. 394).

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## Abstract

Najat El Hachmi is a hybrid writer: she was born in Morocco but moved to Catalonia as a child. She considers herself Catalan but still feels rejected after many years living in Catalonia. This situation enables her to critically reflect on language, translation, and gender and religion issues



of both the source and the target culture. She considers herself part of a border generation, which enables her to understand two different realities.

She has published five books so far – one autobiography and three novels– and has also participated in a book of short stories. Nevertheless, we will focus our paper on those novels in which translation plays a fundamental role: *L'últim patriarca* (2008) and *La filla estrangera* (2015). In these works – characteristic examples of “ontological narratives” (Baker 2006: 31) –, the author shows that cultures and languages are not clearly delimited, but merged. These works display life as a continuous translation and mediation process between cultures.

Furthermore, El Hachmi also approaches the (im)possibility of translating certain situations because they would not have the same meaning in the target language. In these kinds of situations, and also in the clash of religions, the characters appearing in her novels sometimes have to adopt in-between – Tymoczko (2003), Spivak (1993), Simon (1996, 1999, 2001, 2011), Cronin (2000), Wolf (2000, 2008), Snell-Hornby (2001) and Mehrez (1992)– or in-the-third-space (Bhabha, 1994; Wolf, 2000) translation strategies, as we will explore by means of a number of examples taken from the two novels mentioned above.

## Resumen

Najat El Hachmi es una escritora híbrida: nació en Marruecos pero emigró a Cataluña de niña. Se considera catalana pero todavía hoy, tras un buen número de años viviendo en Cataluña, se siente rechazada. Esta situación le permite reflexionar desde un punto de vista crítico acerca de temas, como el lenguaje, la traducción, el género y la religión de las culturas de origen y de llegada. Se considera parte de una generación de frontera que le permite comprender dos realidades diferentes.

Hasta la fecha ha publicado cuatro libros – una autobiografía y tres novelas– y también ha participado en un libro de relatos cortos. No obstante, centraremos nuestro estudio en aquellas novelas en las que la traducción desempeña un papel fundamental: *L'últim patriarca* (2008) y *La filla estrangera* (2015). En estas obras – ejemplos característicos de “narrativas ontológicas” (Baker 2006: 31) –, la autora muestra que las culturas y las lenguas no están delimitadas claramente, sino que se entremezclan. Estas novelas muestran la vida como un proceso de traducción y mediación continuo entre las culturas.

Además de lo anterior, El Hachmi también aborda la (im)posibilidad de traducir determinadas situaciones porque no tendrían el mismo significado en la lengua meta. En este tipo de situaciones, y también en el choque entre religiones, los personajes de sus novelas a veces tienen que adoptar estrategias traductológicas *in-between* – Tymoczko (2003), Spivak (1993), Simon (1996, 1999, 2001, 2011), Cronin (2000), Wolf (2000, 2008), Snell-Hornby (2001) and Mehrez (1992)– o en el tercer espacio (Bhabha, 1994; Wolf, 2000), como veremos a través de un buen número de ejemplos extraídos de las dos novelas mencionadas anteriormente.