



**El Hachmi's Postcolonial Narrative of Language Migration in *L'Ultim Patriarca* (2008)  
A Close Reading of the Use of the Catalan Dictionary as a Literary Device**

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**Abstract:** This essay deals with the way Najat El Hachmi's constructs her own authorial voice in *L'Ultim Patriarca* (2008) as a female Moroccan migrant living in Catalonia. In particular, I will focus on the narrator's journey of linguistic migration, from her native language (Tamazight) to her language of adoption (Catalan). In order to do so, I shall pay attention to the protagonist's critical reading of the Catalan dictionary as it runs parallel to her transition from childhood into adulthood. I will contend that such reading bears witness to a personal commitment to rescue literature qua practice of self-discovery to shed light on and re-create one's psychological, physical, and historical reality. In this sense, the use of the Catalan dictionary as a literary device allows El Hachmi to convey her gradual adoption of a transgressive approach to linguistic and sexual normativity. Ultimately, El Hachmi's personal odyssey throughout the intricacies of Catalan as a language of adoption allows the protagonist to find her own agency by developing a metalinguistic perspective that paves the way for her critique of both the fetishization of the written word as a site of colonial authority, and her father's patriarchal prescription of the grammar of her own life.

**Keywords:** migration, language, patriarchy, exile, agency

**I. Introduction: A Glottopolitical Perspective on El Hachmi's Fictional Biography**

**I.I. A methodological question: What is glottopolitics?**

The term "glottopolitics" (from language - 'glottos' - and politics) was first used by Robert Hall (1951) to refer the deployment of applied linguistics to the governmental management of language within culturally and linguistically plural contexts. In 1986 Louis Guespin and Jean-Baptiste Marcellesi imported the term into the French tradition (*glottopolitique*), and broadened its scope to designate a somewhat more complex relationship between language and politics (Del Valle 19-20). According to these scholars, *glottopolitics* encompasses the Saussurean opposition between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech) ('Cours de linguistique générale' 1916), where *langue* is to be understood as the ensemble of systematic rules and conventions from which a signifying system emerges, and *parole* designates the everyday forms of written and spoken language in which the *langue* is instantiated. This structuralist distinction would be called into question both by the late Saussure and the French authors, but only the latter did so from a poststructuralist perspective, i.e., from the assertion that the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified (as per Saussure's structuralism) was also historically and politically motivated (cf. Upstone 154). It is this poststructuralist usage of *glottopolitics* that would be inherited by the Argentinian author Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux, making the glottopolitical

perspective amenable to interventions in the public sphere of language (Arnoux & Nothstein 9), particularly those where linguistic ideologies and the distribution of power are at stake (e.g. the struggles for the hegemony of one semiotic system over another). Since 2002 and inspired by Arnoux, the Spanish linguist José Del Valle and his linguistics study group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York have adopted a glottopolitical perspective in their analyses, placing emphasis on the study of Spanish nationalism(s) and postcolonial struggles:

La propia dinámica glotopolítica española- en la que catalán, español, gallego y vasco son objeto de disputas políticas abiertas en las que se negocia la relativa legitimidad de todas ellas- ha dado lugar a que, en ocasiones, la defensa del valor del español produzca discursos abiertamente hostiles al nacionalismo y, en concreto, a la ideología del nacionalismo lingüístico. En contraste, en tanto que [sic] lengua panhispánica, el español aparece identificado no solo como instrumento de comunicación que articula la comunidad, sino como abstracto ‘lugar de encuentro’ en que se generan las lealtades colectivas necesarias para la feliz conformación del anhelado mercado panhispánico (e.g. Arnoux & Del Valle 2010 17).

A second-generation immigrant herself<sup>i</sup>, Najat El Hachmi’s (Nador, Morocco, 1979) has elaborated on many issues that are central to the above concerns, particularly as they relate to the link between language, community, and the development of one’s own subjectivity as a female Moroccan immigrant in Catalonia. A case in point of such dynamics is to be found in the voice of her literary alter-ego in *L’Últim Patriarca* (2008).

### I.II. From Nador to Vic: El Hachmi’s Autobiographical Echoes in *L’Últim Patriarca*

In his recent article on *L’Últim Patriarca* Cristián H. Ricci draws upon Landry-Wilfrid Miampika in order to characterize El Hachmi’s *tour de force* as an “autobiografía ficticia” (Miampika 18, cit. in Ricci 72). Miampika defines this literary genre as “un modelo literario diferente con sustrato oral que concilia estética y crítica socio-política” which revolves around “la consolidación narrativa postcolonial marcada por una voluntad y por una profunda subjetividad que intensifica la relación íntima entre historia y ficción” (Miampika 19, cit. in Ricci 87).

There is indeed a telling resemblance between El Hachmi’s life and work. El Hachmi was born into the Amazigh culture, to which the Tamazight language (also known as “the Berber language”) belongs. At the age of eight, she emigrated with her family to the Catalan town of Vic. She began writing a few years later, at the age of twelve, and has since published four books, all of them in Catalan: an autobiographical essay entitled *Jo També Soc Catalana* (2004) and three novels by the name of *L’Últim Patriarca* (2008), *La Caçadora de Cossos* (2011), *La Filla Estrangera* (2015) and *Mare de Llet i Mel* (2018).

Far from a coincidence, El Hachmi’s use of Catalan as her preferred language of literary expression is the product of a conscious decision, one that is based on her glottopolitical awareness that language is intractably linked to the articulation and performance of power and identity. In this sense, her use of the Catalan language is in line with what Abdelkebir Khatibi dubs “la doble crítica del paradigma Otro” (72), i.e., the rejection of the reactionary values of the Amazigh-Muslim society on the one hand, and of Spain’s proverbial intolerance vis-à-vis Catalan, on the other. By her own admission in *Jo També Soc Catalana*,

Al cap i a la fi, ni tan sols és la llengua dels teus pares, és la llengua dels opressors en un regne on l'amazic sempre s'ha considerat de segona categoria, llenguatge oral, només, bàrbars, ens diuen. ¿Et sentiràs ferit el dia que tornis al Marroc i aquells que ostenten et parlin en la llengua del profeta, en la llengua del rei? Segurament menysprearan els nostres sons, però aquesta sensació non et serà desconeguda. La teva altra llengua materna, el català, fou en altres temps perseguida i menystinguda, no en van la teva mare les sent com dues llengües germanes (27).

Based on this and as noted by Nuria Codina, the relevance of El Hachmi's work lies less in the alleged exoticism of her geographical origins than in her ability to articulate a piercing sociocultural critique of both her region of birth (Nador, Morocco) and her place of residence (Vic, Catalunya, Spain):

por un lado, desde el punto de vista del emigrante que ha pasado parte de su infancia en el país de origen, del cual, sin embargo, ya no se reconoce miembro pleno; por otro lado, desde la perspectiva de alguien que, a pesar de sentirse integrado en el país de acogida, no quiere ni puede renunciar a sus raíces y, al mismo tiempo, a menudo es percibido por el entorno social como un inmigrante y un extranjero (196).

Consequently, El Hachmi's authorial locus, (i.e., her place of enunciation) is not so much an in-between (cf. Adelson 2001) as a "third space" (Bhabha 1994, cit. in Codina Sola), a lieu of hybridity motivated by globalization, mass migration, and cultural diaspora. It is from the vantage point of such postcolonial third-space that El-Hachmi crafts an intergenerational and transcultural literature that deconstructs determinate categories such as patriarchy, nation, language, and State. At the same time, this allows her to challenge and renovate the canon of what counts as Spanish and/or Catalan literature in the XXIst century, especially in connection with feminine writing from Africa, Morocco, and Amazigh culture (Codina Sola 197). As claimed by Ricci,

Existe (...) una falta de univocidad en la definición de las "pertenencias étnicas" o nacionalismos que invita a deconstruir los procesos escriturarios de El Hachmi no con el afán de realizar lecturas lineales y simplistas, sino con la voluntad de indagar en los recursos que se utilizan en el campo de la producción literaria a nivel regional y nacional en toda España y, por ende, ver cómo y hasta qué punto las voces subalternas de los inmigrantes logran cuajar en el canon moderno de las literaturas peninsulares" (82).

Within the above context, El Hachmi's use of the dictionary as a literary device is to be understood not only as a clear-cut example of such dynamics, but also as a privileged place from which to illuminate the negotiation of the narrator's sexual and textual voices as a second-generation immigrant throughout the narrative plot of *L'Últim Patriarca*.

## II. The Role of the Catalan Dictionary in the Plot of *L'Últim Patriarca*

There is no need to speculate on the literary rationale behind *L'Últim Patriarca* (2008), since El Hachmi makes it unequivocal from its very inception (chapter 0): the subversion of Mimoun's patriarchal influence, to the credit of his unnamed daughter, who is also the narrator of the story:<sup>ii</sup> "Aquesta és l'única veritat que us volem explicar, la d'un pare que ha d'afrontar la frustració de no veure acomplert el seu destí, la d'una filla que, sense haver-s'ho proposat, va canviar la història dels Driouch per sempre" (7).

Although the author herself divides the book in two parts (the former covers from the Mimoun's origins to his arrival to Catalonia, while the latter encompasses from the author's birth to the subversion of her family's patriarchic control), I would like to stress the analytical fruitfulness of dividing the narrative plot of the novel into the following three stages:

(i) The first stage encompasses the introduction to the patriarch's lineage, stretching from the delineation of Mimoun's genealogy to the birth of his much-anticipated daughter, the apple of his eye. In this part, Mimoun would rather have a daughter than a son, for unlike sons, he claims, daughters are loyal to their parents: "Mimoun (...) només volia filles, deia que elles eres més fidels amb els pares i que els nois sempre t'acaben traint" (114). This section, whose beginning is clearly marked in the very first sentence of the book,<sup>iii</sup> lasts until chapter 34, where the author describes the birth of Mimoun's daughter as a product of her own volition: "jo, amb tant d'enrenou i amb un esperit de rebel·lia que devia heretar del mateix Mimoun, vaig decidir viure" (149).<sup>iv</sup>

(ii) The second stage features the dynamics of the daughter's development of her linguistic and gender self-consciousness as negotiated against the backdrop of her sociocultural entourage. This section begins anywhere between chapter 34 of the first part (her birth) and chapter 3 of the second one (transubstantiation of the mother in daughter,<sup>v</sup> description of the latter's life as a process of -self-translation<sup>vi</sup> and first contact with the Catalan dictionary as a literary artifact),<sup>vii</sup> ending with chapter 23 of the second part, when the daughter's female teacher and confidant gives her a blank notebook so that the former can become "una escriptora de debò" (269).

(iii) The third and final stage revolves around the narrator's frontal opposition to and subversion of Mimoun's patriarchal influence through the successful symbiosis between her body and her writing. This last piece starts between chapters 23 and 27 of the second part (the latter featuring the end of the dictionary, whereupon the girl becomes a woman<sup>viii</sup>) and lasts until the end of the book. In the final chapter, entitled *Una Venjança en tota regla*, the narrator invites Mimoun's uncle to her apartment in order to get sodomized by him, thus completing the subversion of her family's patriarchic control:

(...) el dolor no se sabia on s'acabava o on era que continuava amb el plaer. M'hauria volgut morir, del mal, i encara em vaig tornar a escórrer. Va ser allà mateix, en aquell mateix moment, que van trucar al timbre i al videoporter va aparèixer la cara del pare. Un pare que ja no tornaria a ser patriarca, no pas amb mi, que el que havia vist no ho podria explicar, que una traïció tan fonda no l'hauria imaginada, ni ell i encara menys venint d'una filla tan estimada (331-2).

For the sake of my argument, in what follows I shall focus on a close reading of El Hachmi's use of the Catalan dictionary as a literary device, whose mentioning in the book is confined to the second section of the above-distinguished parts (chapters 4-27). In summarizing all the above three parts, though, I hope to have made apparent that El Hachmi's journey of critical linguistic inculturation into Catalan influences and is influenced by her psychosociological development in general and her gradual acquisition of gender self-consciousness in particular. In what follows, I will analyse how her reading of the Catalan dictionary (which constitutes a pivotal phase in the author's critical engagement with the Catalan language) cannot be read as anecdotal to the overall narrative plot. Rather, it is intractably linked to the latter in

that the reading of this lexicography functions as an optique from which to shed light on El Hachmi's adoption of a transgressive and reappropriative approach to linguistic and sexual normativity.

### III. The Catalan Dictionary

El Hachmi introduces the Catalan dictionary at the end of the third chapter of second part of the book (which falls under the second stage of my above-described division). At this point, Mimoun's daughter, who is still very young, claims that "vaig començar a llegir el diccionari" (180). The main motivation behind this decision is made explicit by El Hachmi at the beginning of the following chapter (4, entitled *Diccionari de la llengua Catalana*): "Per escapar del *poltergeist*" (181).

In order to make full sense of this reference, we ought to look back at the previous chapter (number 3), not only because it features the first appearance of the word "poltergeist", but also because its title, *Carol-Anne, on ets?* makes it clear that El Hachmi is using the term in question in reference to Steven Spielberg's film of the same name (1982), whose protagonist is precisely Carol-Anne. In this supernatural horror film, one night Carol-Anne, who had hitherto enjoyed a quiet life with her family in Orange County (California), experiences a paranormal phenomenon: she awakens and starts talking to the family's TV set. The following night a ghost emerges from the TV set and kidnaps her, whereupon a quick intensification of paranormal phenomena ensues, including a violent earthquake and further bizarre events. Likewise, the psychological upbringing of Mimoun's daughter is mediated by a plethora of traumatic events, making violence and sexual tension everyday "poltergeists" of her childhood. In the film, a spiritual medium by the name of Tangina Barrons manages to exorcise the ghost, retrieving Carol-Anne. That is why Mimoun's daughter claims at the beginning of the fourth chapter that "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 es buidar-se" (181). It is at this point that the use of the Catalan dictionary comes in, proving that its relevance is not limited to the linguistic upbringing of the protagonist, but it also applies to the kind of emotional (laughing/crying) and sexual (orgasm) education that runs parallel to it:

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 (181).

A corollary of the above paragraph is that the Catalan dictionary is conceptualized by the narrator less as an end in itself than as a means to an end (i.e., to laugh, to cry or to reach the climax). This is relevant for a number of reasons.

First, because it signals a critical distance vis-à-vis both (the Catalan) language and dictionaries. From a rather naive approach to language, we could begin to define a dictionary by drawing upon the famous words of the XVIIIth English lexicographer Samuel Johnson. A dictionary, he intimated, is "a book explaining the words of any language alphabetically" (cit. in Green 12). Far from matching the approach adopted by the narrator of *L'Últim Patriarca*,

though, Johnson's definition constitutes the very target of El Hachmi's glottopolitical critique. In this sense, the above-quoted beginning of chapter four of the second part fits better with the definition put forward by Alain Rey: "the dictionary represents an illusion of totality, of an immobile order of things, or harmony. It seems to exhaust the universe and the lexicon" (Epps 14). This illusion of harmony, one could argue, offers the kind of peace and understanding Mimoun's daughter seems to be after in a context dominated by the *poltergeists* caused by the patriarch of the family.

Although El Hachmi does not seem to deny the crucial function of a dictionary as a linguistic compass thanks to which a second-generation immigrant can begin to navigate the Catalan society and culture<sup>ix</sup>, soon enough it becomes apparent that she is interested in exposing such approach as reductionist. For El Hachmi, such a perspective fails to take into account the political and subjective motivations that underscore the crafting and dissemination of the dictionary as a cultural artifact. El Hachmi brings this point home through the combination of the recurring reading of the dictionary by Mimoun's daughter at the end of each chapter (from letters C to Z) until the very completion of the narrator's sexual and linguistic education, on the one hand, and the occasionally playful tone of such reading, on the other.

The first aspect brings us to a supplementary dimension towards which the above "illusion of harmony" implicit in any dictionary seems to point: its ability to map a whole cultural cosmology. Indeed, from a glottopolitical perspective, it has been customary to expose the dictionary as a planetarium of the colonizer's world, one that is shared with the colonized through the written words of the dictionary less in altruistic fashion than as a token of cultural superiority heralding a political conquest by means of the symbolic (Calvet 1974). Eduardo Subirats takes this point to its logical conclusion when he conceptualizes the dictionary as a synecdoche of the "imperio de las gramáticas y lexicografías coloniales, y de sus sucesivas modernizaciones" (81), a privileged locus of colonial linguistic standardization alongside the Grammar and the Orthography (2015).

On the other hand, El Hachmi's playfulness in reading the dictionary, which is conveyed through a number of irreverent and tongue-in-cheek remarks, manifests that the author does not take what she reads (and by extension, the normative and prescriptive discourses that are predominant in the environment into which she is being inculturated) at face value. Rather, she takes a creative and critical distance towards them, and in so doing paves the way for the eventual adoption of a similarly transgressive approach to linguistic and sexual normativity, one whose logical conclusion shall be the subversion her family's patriarchic control. By way of illustration, let us consider the protagonist's reading of some of the entries listed under the letter L: "La, sisena nota musical. Làbar, un estendard adoptat per no sé quin emperador. Labdàcida, que ja era massa complicat per llegir-me'n la definició" (224). Thus, far from revering the Catalan dictionary as a cultural fetish (or the Catalan language and society, for that matter), Mimoun's daughter does not attribute to it any sacred value (if anything, the irreverence of her reading de-sacralizes the proverbial solemnity of the dictionary). In this sense, one could surmise that El Hachmi's deployment of the Catalan dictionary functions here as a literary practice of postcoloniality,<sup>x</sup> whereby the narrator's whimsical access to the Catalan cosmology as enshrined in the dictionary takes places within the empowering framework of what Mignolo calls "discolonial thought from detachment" (2006): "The detachment promoted by dis-colonial

thought entails the confidence that it is possible to distrust the implacable logic of power, getting rid of the straitjacket of the categories of thought that naturalize a colonialism of knowledge and of being“ (15-16).

In addition to this, the narrator’s tongue-in-cheek interaction with the Catalan dictionary implies not only the adoption of a critical perspective on lexicographies as colonial artifacts of knowledge, but also a nuancing of the potential of Catalan as a language of postcolonial emancipation vis-à-vis Spanish and Tamazight. Indeed, rather than the last word on the narrator’s sexual and linguistic subjectivity as a second-generation immigrant, Catalan is literally the first one, the initial step of a negotiation that necessarily implies the reappropriation of (as opposed to the submission to) the Catalan language and societal mores.

Last but not least, such critical distance from the Catalan dictionary is also a necessary condition for the emergence of the protagonist’s reflexive experience as an autonomous individual. As Wittgenstein remarked in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), language is a public tool for the understanding of private life (so that our self-understanding depends on the words of others, to which we gain access through a process of enculturation into a given cultural community). El Hachmi makes this clear by portraying the upbringing of Mimoun’s daughter alongside the pages of the Catalan dictionary as a process of self-translation as self-understanding. Hence the narrator’s reference to the letter C at the end of chapter 4, as she is introduced to a new reality, namely, Isabel, a Christian mistress of Mimoun: “Jo ja devia anar per la C del diccionari quan el pare ens va portar a conèixer Isabel. *Ca*, que és gos. O *ca*, que és la lletra K. O *ca*, que és la contracció de casa a ca l’Albert o a ca la ciutat” (184)<sup>xi</sup>. Likewise, the struggle experienced by Mimoun’s daughter when attempting to switch languages in highly emotional situations is symptomatic of her difficulty in coping with odd realities, such as the fact that she ought to refer to Mimoun as Manel (his adopted name in Catalonia):

el pare volia que parléssim en aquella llengua davant d’ells per no ofendre’ls, que es pensaran que diem vés a saber què. Però jo no podia, no podia parlar amb ell en cap més llengua que no fos la llengua amb què el vaig conèixer. M’hi jugava una nata però no podia. Podia acostumar-me que Mimoun fos Manel i que nosaltres ja fóssim d’aquí, però no podia canviar el pare Mimoun pel pare Manel (187-8).

This sensation is exacerbated by the fact that the narrator is constantly forced to translate her family disputes, as when a bitter argument explodes between her mother and Rosa (yet another Christian lover of Mimoun): “em feien sentir frases que jo no volia sentir i em feien dir coses que jo no volia dir Què diuen?, deia la mare, què diu?, deien elles. Jo hauria cridat res, res, res, calieu totes si no us enteneu, però la mare ja estava prou enreixada des de la finestra des d’on parlava” (196). Then, as the narrator reaches the letter H of the dictionary, we learn that she has already had her first orgasm (chapter 9). Nevertheless, she is still haunted by the “poltergeist” of her father’s abuse. In the previous chapter Mimoun’s daughter makes reference to the fact that her father had been throwing “ganivets” -knives- and “gots” -glasses- at her and her mother. In response, she resolved to keep reading: “tot i que havia tingut el meu primer orgasme, no n’hi havia hagut prou per desfer-me del *poltergeist*. Continuava la lectura. *Ha*, que es veu que és força difícil de definir; *habeas corpus*, que és una mena d’immunitat; *hàbil*, apte per a alguna cosa, capaç, idoni” (206).

The dictionary, however, can only take the unnamed protagonist so far in life. In this sense, the subsequent warning by her neighbour Soumisha serves to emphasize El Hachmi's iconoclastic understanding of lexicographies as alleged prescriptive arbiters of the world's true meaning: "Filla (...) ja és hora que t'espavilis una mica, no tens altre remei. Ja sé que a tu t'interessa més llegir aquell llibre tan gruixut que tens, però allà, no hi aprendràs res de la vida" (221).

Indeed, as her mother kicks Rosa out of Mimoun's life and the narrator's understanding of life continues to increase, our protagonist grows ever more skeptical of sexual, social and linguistic regimes of normativity. In this sense, her giving up on reading the definitions of every single word communicates the idea that in a world full of rules and instructions one can only read so many, let alone become acquainted with them: "*La*, sisena nota musical. *Làbar*, un estandard adoptat per no sé quin emperador. *Labdàcida*, que ja era massa complicat per llegir-me'n la definició (...) *Maastrichtià*, que és molt complicat" (224, 229). This, however, is not to deny that reading the dictionary can be effective as an anxiolytic: "(...) jo ja no em despertava quan [Mimoun] feia soroll a la nit (...) entre llegir les vides de profetes i el diccionari jo ja no m'hi fixava tant, en aquestes coses" (227). This appears again some pages later, as the family moves to a new house: "va ser llegint que vaig sentir sorolls i vaig començar a pensar en com n'era, de vulnerable, aquella casa (...) torna a llegir, em deia. *Mulat -a, mulater, mulati*" (232). In the same vein, the narrator's reading of the letter N at the end of chapter 15 will take place immediately after a new "poltergeist", namely, the umpteenth beating from her father: "la mare i jo vam anar a parar a terra, després d'haver fet un parell de voltes per les escales (...) L'endemà (...) el pare deia, has vist que li has fet a la mare? *Nabab*, un títol de funcionari a l'Índia o vés a saber on. *Nabateu* és un antic poble semita. *Nabi*, profeta" (234).

Shortly afterwards, our protagonist gets her first menstruation: "aquell mateix estiu em va venir la sang. *O*, nom de la lletra o. *O*, conjunció. *Oasi*, que és allò que podries trobar en un desert." (238). Furthermore, she begins to engage in sexual games with her female friends (cf. chapter 17, entitled *Nocilla, Super Mario i el Sexe*), as well as to arouse men's sexual desire (cf. chapters 17-8), all of which result in Mimoun stepping up his protectionism. This strategy shall prove highly ineffective, for all the same his daughter goes on to date a man. Last, but not least, upon her temporary but alienating return to Morocco (itself a proof that as stressed by Codina Sola el Hachmi/the narrator "ya no se reconoce miembro pleno" in her country of birth -196-), she's told by her local family that it is high time she gets married:

Jo encara no ho devia entendre i ja vaig pensar que definitivament aquell no era el meu món (...) No em penso casar ni ara ni mai. I elles a riure i riure perquè no podien entendre que algú pogués tenir una alternativa al matrimoni (...) Fet, parlaré amb el seu pare i el proper estiu farem la cerimònia de prometatge. *Rabada*, una regió del cor. *Rabada*, un noi que ajuda el pastor. *Rabassa*, una part de la soca d'un arbre" (251).

Her getting her first period can indeed be read as the beginning of the protagonist's empowerment as a woman, which as we shall see below, prefaces and ultimately runs parallel to her transition from passive reader to active writer.

Thus, ignoring the instructions given by her father, upon returning from Morocco she will engage ever more with men. This will take place at the expense of time previously devoted to the



reading of the dictionary. To this, one needs to add the presence of an ever-growing resentment towards her father (chapter 21):

No et vull veure amb cap noi pel carrer, mai, que no et vegi amb cap noi pel carrer. Però què passa quan el teu millor amic té la pega de ser un noi? (...) no podies pas dir-li tu vés per una vorera i jo per una altra que ja ens trobarem allà, no (...) I encara menys si et feia riure i tu passaves menys temps llegint el diccionari (...) Era aquella mena de coses que em feien pensar si jo realment el comencava a odiar o era l'adolescència. L'evitava [a Mimoun] sempre que podia, no tolerava la seva presència, la seva manera de parlar (...) jo ja no sabia si era jo qui canviava o era que cada dia el suportava menys (252).

The patriarch's beating and interdictions shall not last for much longer, and this self-prophecy from the narrator will be catalyzed by her relationship with a female teacher, who will also become her confidant. In chapter 23, we learn that the said teacher gives Mimoun's daughter a blank notebook so that the unnamed protagonist can become "una escriptora de debó" (269). The transition experienced by Mimoun's daughter from adolescence into adulthood, and from learning the contours of her oppression (part 2) to frontally opposing them (part 3), is captured by the literary imagination of El Hachmi via the overlapping of the inception of the protagonist's journey as a literary woman, on the one hand, and her ending of a now-almost-superfluous dictionary, on the other one: "Ja no llegies gaire el diccionari, que no et feia tanta falta, ara que estaves a punt d'acabar-lo. *Wagnerià*, relatiu al músic. *Wagnerisme*, un corrent dramaticomusical. *Wagnerita*, un fluofosfat de magnesi" (274).

Just as the narrator edges ever closer to the successful symbiosis of her body and her writing (as instantiated in the daughter's open discussion about sexual desire in chapters 25 and 26), she realizes that Mimoun will continue to monitor her sexual relationships with men for as long as he is around: "Escrivia molt en aquelles planes que m'havia regalat la mestra que era amiga (...) El diccionari ja se m'acabava i jo havia de créixer del tot, però em resistia i pensava que tot era una fase, que aquella obsessió que tenia per mi aviat li passaria. No era així, era just el contrari. Com més gran em feia, més prop el tenia" (286-7). In other words, as she scans the last entries of the dictionary, Mimoun's daughter has finally internalized the idea that she will not be able to write herself unless her linguistic subversion is accompanied by a frontal opposition to her family's patriarchic control as embodied in the figure of Mimoun. Significantly, it is at this very moment that her last reading of the dictionary takes place: "*Zum-zum*, una onomatopeia. *Zurvanisme*, un terme massa complicat. *Zwitteriò*, denominació genèrica dels composts d'estructura betaínica" (287).

In sum, the recurring reading of the dictionary at the end of each chapter until the very completion of the narrator's sexual and linguistic education follows a pedagogical logic that mirrors that of Wittgenstein's ladder in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Wittgenstein asserted, "my propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it. He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (TLP, 6.54). Likewise, the narrator's systematic readings of the Catalan dictionary serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands El Hachmi's literary maneuver ends up recognizing those particular entries of the dictionary as nonsensical, when (s)he, just like El Hachmi/Mimoun's daughter, has used them as steps to climb beyond them. (S)he must, so to speak, throw away the

dictionary after having read it. (S)he/El Hachmi/the narrator must transcend these entries, and only then will see the(ir) world aright.

The narrator is finally in a position to act in full accordance with her own beliefs and desires, but for that autonomy to shine through, she still needs to undermine her family's patriarchal control. This is the subject of stage 3 of my own above tripartite distinction (which starts between chapters 23 and 27 of the second part and lasts until the end of the book). Her first attempt at doing so is to marry a man against the initial opposition of Mimoun, only to realize that this was just another "bend in the road" in her journey towards emancipation, thus filing for divorce: "Va ser allà que vaig començar a pensar que le destí me l'havia de fer jo i que potser ja era hora de deixar de fer meandres. Va ser allà que vaig prendre la decisió que ho precipitaria tot" (324). Now fully aware of the irreducible sovereignty of her female body, the narrator decides to take full advantage of it in order to transcend Mimoun's patriarchal influence once and for all. To this effect, she shall carry out a "venjança en tota regla" (39). By telling the story of her own seduction of Mimoun's uncle, persuading him to engage in a sexual act which would have scandalized her family (sodomization), the narrator of *L'Últim Patriarca* will make the patriarchal control of the family crumble under the fall of its own contradictory expectations and desires vis-à-vis the female body: "que una traició tan fonda", El Hachmi concludes, "no l'hauria imaginada ni ell i encara menys venint d'una filla tan estimada" (332).

Ultimately, El Hachmi's literary use of the Catalan dictionary in *L'Últim Patriarca* is part and parcel of a personal commitment to rescue literature as a practice of self-discovery through which to shed light on and re-create one's psychological, physical and historical reality, particularly as it resonates with the concerns of "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text" (Showalter 249).

In other words and to put it with Ricci, "la utilización de su cuerpo que hace la narradora no hace más que derrocar el poder patriarcal en la medida que ese cuerpo y su indomable sexualidad ... esa fortaleza irreductible de la individualidad soberana' (...) constituye una entidad de mediación y de debate político, económico y religioso (...), que posee la capacidad de subvertir, pervertir e intensificar los intercambios sociales (85, cf. Epps 137, 252).

#### IV. Conclusion

El Hachmi's use of the Catalan dictionary as a literary device functions in *L'Últim Patriarca* as a glottopolitical reflection. In particular, it is best understood as a critique of the fetishization of the written word as a site of colonial authority, which echoes Mimoun's patriarchal prescription of the grammar of her daughter's life as a second-generation female Moroccan immigrant in Catalonia. Moreover, the adoption of a critical distance towards the Catalan dictionary suggests that El Hachmi is mindful of the fact that her conscious decision to adopt Catalan as her literary language is not either uncritical or unproblematic. The author manages to make both points by having Mimoun's daughter engage in a systematic (but also playful and irreverent) reading of the dictionary, only to then close it right before the denouement, as if the book in question had become a compendium of societal prescriptions that her subjectivity had outgrown by that point. The journey of Mimoun's daughter alongside the Catalan dictionary is thus portrayed as a process of self-discovery and transcultural reappropriation, a sexual and textual negotiation as an

immigrant that leads the narrator to a full acquisition of agency over her body and language on her way to subvert the family's patriarchic control.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Even though El Hachmi was born in Morocco, subsequently moving to Catalonia at the age of eight, her father had already immigrated from Morocco to Catalonia and settled there (both in reality and in the plot of the book in question). It is in this sense that I speak of her as a second-generation immigrant.

<sup>ii</sup> The fact that Mimoun's daughter goes unnamed for the whole book is not without its glottopolitical implications. First, because it seems to suggest that the protagonist, who is at the same time the narrator, has yet to make a name for herself, and that such name can only be acquired through the literary re-creation of her own journey. Second, because the absence of a name is a recurring topic in postcolonial literature. Thus, from Césaire's rewriting of *The Tempest* to Žižek's work, passing through Malcom X, these authors have all stressed the imperialist connotations of every act of baptism. Conversely, it is only on the basis of the absence of a name that new emancipatory identities and stories can emerge, as noted by Mackenzie apropos black Americans: "It's in this way (...) that black Americans have carved from their own experience a new way to be in the world, one that is more truly universal—and indeed more American—than the assimilation-in-the-guise-of-integration imagined over the centuries by whites" (Mackenzie 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> "Aquesta és la història de Mimoun, fill de Driouch, fill d'Allal, fill de Mohamed, fill de Mohand, fill de Bouziane, i que nosaltres anomenarem, simplement, Mimoun. Es la seva història i la història de l'últim dels grans patriarques que formen la llarga cadena dels avantpassats de Driouch" (7).

<sup>iv</sup> Compare this to the daughter's statement in the penultimate chapter (II, 38): "(...) allò era la llibertat. Decidir, decidir i decidir" (325).

<sup>v</sup> Maimoun's daughter becomes the new recipient of the patriarch's customary screaming, usually directed at his wife: "El pare deia, parla, *cojones*, parla d'una vegada o rebras igual que la teva mare. Jo no sabia que havia de dir i a hores d'ara encara no recordo si vaig repetir el que ell em dictava. La mare ha follat amb el germà del pare. Em costava de dir-ho no per res, però es que m'havien ensenyat que follar era una paraula molt lletja, la pitjor de totes i tot allò no tenia cap sentit" (178) (cf. Ricci 79-80).

<sup>vi</sup> "La mare es va anar fent petita, semblava que es volgues esvaïr. Sobretot quan el pare va tornar a parlar i a nosaltres ens deia allò de digueu a la puta de la vostra mare que...digueu a la porca de la vostra mare que...digueu a aquella gossa que...Nosaltres no mes li dèiem mama ell diu que...Allà vam començar a fer de traductors" (177).

<sup>vii</sup> "(...) Això es el que ella va entendre de la traducció del pare. Jo, que no sabia quan s'acabaria tot allò, vaig començar a llegir el diccionari" (180).

<sup>viii</sup> "Que el diccionari ja se m'acabava i jo havia de créixer del tot" (286).

<sup>ix</sup> Bejoint seems to hint at this idea when claiming that "a dictionary is primarily an instrument to be used when one needs a piece of information about a word in particular, about the language in general, or about the world" (cit. in idem).

<sup>x</sup> The key difference between "colonialism" and "coloniality" is that the former refers to the political and economic system by virtue of which a given State dominates and exploits a colony, whereas the latter designates kind of discourse that serves to legitimize that colonialism (Mignolo 2006).

<sup>xi</sup> Indeed, Abdeslam Canales seems to arrive to a similar conclusion when he claims that In his article Ricci reaches a similar conclusion when he claims that "Este recurso de finalizar un buen número de capítulos con la lectura de algunos étimos extraídos de su diccionario de cabecera, convierte el catalán en un instrumento de auto-traducción, con el fin de asegurar al texto una coherencia cultural" (2016: 33).

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