

*The Western Sahara's Diaspora:
Homeland, Exile and Resistance among Saharawi Women*

Maria Grazia Cantalupo
Universitat de Barcelona
m.grazia90@hotmail.it

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Abstract: In the following essay we will analyze the Western Sahara's diaspora through the lenses of women's eyes, who have experienced feelings as physical and psychological violence, sexual harassment, forced displacement and separation from their families, becoming 'illegal' human beings in their own homeland, because of the colonial Moroccan occupation of Saharawis' territories and their supposed pretensions of owning the Western Sahara's land to justify their violent foreign policy. In particular, we will focus our attention on the analysis of the small book *A Norwegian hope journey – Between the strong sand and the white snow lives my hope for a free Sahara* written by the young Saharawi's journalist Asria Mohamed Taleb in 2011, in which her *écriture* embodies proper feelings and contradictions attributable to subjects in exile, experiencing a condition in balance between nostalgia for the 'lost' homeland and gratitude to Norway, a country that has accepted and welcomed her, giving her the hope for a better future. Furthermore, we will analyze two documentary-movies about the Saharawi question: the first one, *Life is waiting* by Iara Lee (2015), is an attempt to give voice to the creations of local artists who are forced to live in situations of constant fear and repression; the second one, *Just to let you know that I'm alive* by Simona Ghizzoni and Emanuela Zuccalà (2014), reports the terrible experiences of some of the Saharawi women who have been abused, tortured, arrested and forced to disappear in secret prisons while fighting for their freedom.

Key words: exile – homeland – resistance

Nosotros somos los olvidados/ los saharauis y el Polisario/ Los hijos de la noche en
un mar de arena /que sueñan como volver a su amada tierra/ Treinta años luchando,
treinta esperando/ treinta luchando, treinta esperando/ Sáhara, saharai, Sáhara
libre, soy saharai (Petisme, 2004)

This essay's intent is to analyze the Western Sahara's diaspora through the eyes of Saharawi women, who embody the Saharawi people's struggle for self-determination and independence from the illegitimate Moroccan oppressor. According to the Polisario project, women have a strong role in the revolutionary process: "la Sahara" is "gendered as feminine" (Allan 2008: 5) and women are a clear representation of the national, collective identity. They're the 'caretakers' of both the family and the community and "they play a key role in the running of the camps" (viii); unlike the "stereotypical image of Arab and Islamic women as passive, submissive and heavily oppressed" (viii), Saharawi women are quite emancipated and educated. They actively participate in the political life of the Tindouf refugee camp and some of them have had the opportunity to study abroad. Nowadays, Saharawi people are scattered in many countries, principally in Spain, Latin America and Algeria; they've experienced life outside the camp, they've learned new languages and used them as an instrument to put the international spotlight on the Saharawi question.

Asria Mohamed Taleb's small book *A Norwegian hope journey – Between the strong sand and the white snow lives my hope for a free Sahara* (2011) is an example of a text written by a woman in exile that uses words as a weapon against the oppressor and a political *manifesto* for the Saharawis in exile, the *desaparecidos*, the refugees. The young journalist feels nostalgic when she thinks of her homeland, an idealized place, perpetually colonized, betrayed by Spain and raped by the Moroccan invader. The only dream she has is to come back where she thinks she belongs, her *dadda's* (grandmother) land, a place she's only seen in old pictures; in her imagination the Western Sahara is just "a mythic place of desire" (Brah 1996: 192), the Promised Land she will probably never be able to see. Actually, Asria Taleb has been always living 'in-between': on the one hand, she is a daughter of exile, because she was born in the Tindouf refugee camp and, on the other, she left that barren corner of dry land in the Algerian desert seeking asylum in Norway; she has "various 'homes' and 'identities' in perpetual suspension" (Brah 1996: 205), she has crossed many borders becoming a hybrid subject in the "diaspora space" (208), an experiential space where all the differences intertwine and new forms of consciousness emerge.

In this context, *Life is waiting*, a 2015 documentary-movie by filmmaker Iara Lee, perfectly depicts the situation in the limbo-space(s) of the Saharawis' exile, recording the subversive creations of local artists and "giving voice to the aspirations of a desert people for whom colonialism has never ended" (Lee 2015). However, the Saharawi people that, back in 1975 decided to stay in El Aaiún, the occupied territories' capital, started their own *Intifada*, borrowing the term from the Palestinian resistance movement. The Saharawi guerrilla is a pacific opposition to the criminal invader, organized by the nationalist activists that write their freedom on the walls and sing their revolutionary songs with rage. Nevertheless, the Moroccan counterattack has always been violent and repressive and every single day the Saharawi people have to face the fear of being arrested, tortured and forced to disappear in secret prisons. *Just to let you know that I'm alive*, a 2014 documentary-film by Simona Ghizzoni and Emanuela

Zuccalà, “is an attempt to give voices to the women of the Saharawi people who suffered from some of the most severe and under-reported human rights abuses in the last thirty years” (Ghizzoni 2014).

Historical context

The Western Sahara, located in the north-west corner of Africa between Morocco and Mauritania, is “one of the most inhospitable places on Earth, (...) and this bleak land on the western edge of the great Saharan desert has been the theatre of one of Africa’s most bitter and intractable wars” (Hodges 1983: vii). The Western Sahara has been a former Spanish colony since 1885 and it was annexed by Morocco only in 1975. Since then it has been the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco and its indigenous Saharawi people, led by the Polisario Front. In effect, as Susan Humprey asserts, “the combination of the Spanish Sahara’s valuable resources, the historically-motivated territorial ambitions of Morocco, and King Hassan’s desire to divert attention away from pressing domestic issues such as poverty, unemployment and the negative effects of authoritarian rule, all led Morocco to make and maintain its claim to the Spanish Sahara” (2009), even if, as Mundy points out, the Western Sahara has never been a *terra nullius*, because it was “inhabited by peoples which, if nomadic, were socially and politically organized in tribes and under chiefs competent to represent them” (2008: 3). As a consequence, Morocco cannot exercise any sovereignty over Western Sahara because, in 1885, this land was “populated by highly organized people” (Mundy 2008: 4).

However, despite the creation of MINURSO (Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Organisation d’un Referendum au Sahara Occidental) in 1991 and the international acknowledgement of the violation of the basic human rights inflicted by the Moroccan government, the Saharawis’ voice keeps on being unheard, their fight for self-determination and freedom is surrounded by the total indifference of both international organizations and media, their land is still under illicit occupation and the referendum on independence has yet to take place. Teresa Whitfield describes this situation as “the unfortunate combination of territorial ambition in Morocco and studied disinterest from states in the broader international community unwilling to jeopardize relations with a strategically located regional power” (2007: 165). Actually, both Spain and France have signed some agreements with Morocco allowing them to exploit the Western Sahara waters and subsoil and the United States are their main weapon providers; for these reasons, all these states have “significant cultural, economic and political interests in Morocco (...) and they are not prepared to sacrifice such a productive and valuable relationship by pursuing a policy that favors the freedom and self-determination of the Saharawi people” (Humprey 2009). As a result, it looks like this conflict will remain unresolved, because too many powerful players are involved in this field. Nowadays, the Western Sahara is “officially classified as Africa’s last colony” (Allan 2008: vi), and, after 42 years, the natives are still engaged in a diplomatic fight to get their land back.

Today, the Saharawi nation is divided into three geographical areas: the costal part under Moroccan occupation, the Liberated Territories, an area recovered by the Polisario during many years of fighting, and the Tindouf refugee camp, the Algerian *hamada*, a proper republic in the exile. During the 16-year-long insurgency, the Saharawis have been through a real exodus, they've been bombarded with white phosphor and napalm and driven out of their land; a group of Saharawi people have found asylum in Algeria, creating a state-like infrastructure in those camps. In that harsh territory, "one of the hottest places on earth" (Taleb 2011: 7), Saharawis live their life as refugees and, even if they have their own government and good health care, their life still depends on humanitarian aids. Furthermore, between 1981 and 1987, Morocco has built a 2700 km wall dividing the Saharawi territory into occupied areas and a Liberated Zone. Locals call it 'the wall of shame' and it is surrounded by 10 million anti-personnel mines and it is the longest one in the world after the Great Wall of China. It is a barbed wire fence that separates entire families and symbolizes the Saharawis' forced displacement.

The Saharawi's diaspora through women's eyes

As Cohen points out, the term diaspora "is found in the Greek translation of the Bible and originates in the composit verb *dia* and *sperain*, namely 'to scatter', 'to spread' or 'to disperse'" (2008: 21). In this context, the Saharawis are victims of a diaspora that started with a traumatic event: they've been forced to leave their homeland because of the violent occupation of the Western Sahara territories. In transnational subjects, the relation with the 'homeland' is of vital importance. As Safran points out, members of diaspora "retain a collective memory about their original land, they idealize their ancestral home and are committed to the restoration of the original homeland and continue in various ways to relate to it" (1991: 83-4).

A clear example of this tension is expressed in the book *A Norwegian hope journey: between the strong sand and the white snow lives my hope for a free Sahara* by Asria Mohamed Taleb, a Saharawi journalist currently living in Norway. Just by reading the title, we understand the writer is situated in a kind of 'liminal space', between the piece of land she calls 'home' and the cold, 'beautiful and magical country' that has welcomed her. She is on the threshold, between 'here' and 'there', and precariousness is the force driving her existence. She has crossed many frontiers and in this "journey across geographical and psychic borders" (Brah 1996: 204), her experience has been contaminated by 'the other' and, as a woman in exile, her "identity is always plural and in process" (195). Despite that, the nationalistic discourse is rooted in her words, as an attempt to break the chains of Moroccan colonization and to put an end to the media blackout about the Saharawi question. Actually, her statements reflect the Polisario ideology "based on revolutionary, socialist discourses that emphasize the principle that collective interests should always precede those of the individual" (Allan 2008: 2) and, in this context, Asria feels like a messenger that has to spread word about the Saharawi tragedy all over the world. As Brah points out, "the word diaspora often invokes the imagery of separation and dislocation (...) but diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginning" (1996: 193): the writer depicts Norway as "a magical place,

that would make all [her] suffering disappear” (Taleb 2011: 26), a safe and developed nation where differences coexist, “where we can live together, despite the multiplicity of our backgrounds” (Taleb 2011: 12).

As we can see, diasporic “identities have become deterritorialized and constructed and deconstructed in a flexible and situational way” (Cohen 2008: 2): Asria has become a hybrid subject; although she embodies the struggle for independence and self-determination of her nation, she really empathizes with Norwegians too. As a demonstration of her being ‘in-between’, she has dedicated her little manifesto to both the Saharawi people and the victims killed in the Norway attacks in 2011, all innocent people that share a tragic event:

I was born in a refugee camp in Algeria as thousands of other Saharawis as a result of the war in 1975, when thousands of Saharawis were forced to flee from their land because of the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara: this conflict has lasted for more than 36 years. While I was putting candles for the memory of the Utøya victims on the blue stone in Bergen, I did not know what I should do to stand with the Norwegian sadness? I wished I had blue eyes and blond hair since it's hard to make them see the sadness in my heart. I wanted to be Norwegian more than any time before (Taleb 2011: 36)

What Asria M. Taleb is experiencing as a result is a “homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for homeland” (Brah 1996: 180), in her imaginary, home is double, triple, and that “does not mean that [she] doesn't feel anchored in the place of settlement” (194): she is a nomadic subject and she has experienced multi-lingual, cross-cultural realities; her identity is fragmented, multiple, she lives on precarious borders and feelings as alienation and fear can arise but, as Cohen points out, “the tension between an ethnic, national and transnational identity is often a creative, enriching one” (2008: 7).

Actually, many of the Saharawi people scattered in Spain and Algeria are living a ‘deterritorialized diaspora’, since they “recreate through the mind, through artefacts and popular culture, and through a shared imagination” (Cohen 2008: 8) the uncertain condition of an expatriate. In this ‘liminal’ place, the documentary-movie *Life is waiting* by Iara Lee, a Brazilian filmmaker of Korean descent, perfectly portrays the Saharawi ‘Cultures of Resistance’ in the limbo space(s) of exile. Many young Saharawis currently living in Spain express with rage the suffering caused by dispersal, forced displacement, alienation and denial; for example, Yslem ‘*Hijo del desierto*’, rapper in exile, reflects the condition of a refugee living in a foreign country. He sings in Spanish, in a demonstration of the contamination produced in diasporic subjects and he acknowledges that creative resistance (music, theater, painting) is a non-violent weapon that is very incisive, because it targets people's consciousness. Mariem Hassan, legendary singer of the resistance movement, exiled in Spain, wrote many patriotic songs as a symbol of fight against all colonialists. She was an Amazon, a woman seeking freedom until death. In both cases, the idea of ‘homeland’ “is imbued with an expressive charge and a sentimental pathos that seem to be almost universal” (Cohen 2008: 103) but, in the case of women, the country is seen as motherland, a “warm, cornucopian breast from which the people collectively suck their nourishment” (103).

As Allen points out, in the Saharawi case, the nation is gendered as feminine and “motherhood is linked to political resistance” (2008: 40). As we can clearly see in the 2014 documentary-film *Just to let you know that I'm alive* by Emanuela Zuccalà e Simona Ghizzoni, women play a key role in the opposition to the Moroccan colonizer in the occupied territories, where a climate of terror, insecurity, uncertainty reigns. Degja Lachgare, Soukaina Jid Ahloud, Sultana Khaya, are just some of the names of women that have been raped, violated, physically and mentally abused, forced to disappear for decades and locked away in ‘black’ prisons. They’ve experienced a violent separation from their families and community, followed by years of absence and obscurity. They are the modern *desaparecidas*, Amazons belonging to the Polisario Front, ‘*clandestinas*’ according to the Moroccan State. More than being “Saharawi kidnapped and tortured, they are mothers, whose fate illustrates the dehumanized nature of a Moroccan aggressor willing to cross all the lines” (Allen 2008: 49). Their discourse, more than being subjective and relegated to the personal experience, is communal and acquires a universal meaning: the experience as a mother symbolizes the suffering of a people.

Aminatou Haidar, an ex-disappeared, is the most famous Saharawi human right activist. She embodies national identity: a fragmented woman whose strength is the hope that her homeland will be free one day. Her motherhood is “socializing” (Allen 2008: 50), since her fight, her sufferings, are the same her people have been experiencing since 1975. I would like to conclude this paragraph with an interview made to Aminatou Haidar, to explain more clearly this concept:

I've never thought to stop my fight because I'm a mother. If I've suffered and my generation has suffered, I have to fight so that my children could live in peace, with dignity. Even without mother. But they cannot live without dignity. They can live as orphans, without a mother, so that they can fight against life with dignity. Because people that have lost their dignity have no value at all. (Haidar, 2012)

Conclusion

As seen above, Saharawi women have a strong nationalistic identity, because they're still fighting against the consequences of an unfinished decolonization. They have a leading role in the story of suffering and hope concerning their people. Today, some of the Saharawis that escaped from the Moroccan occupation live in exile in the Algerian desert, one of the most inhospitable places on Earth. Every day, they have to face the precariousness of their lives. On the other hand, many of them are displaced in Spain and Latin America. As diasporic subjects, they have crossed many borders and their identities have been affected by the situation they have experienced as refugees. In the stories they tell, ‘homeland’ is an idealized place that arouses feelings as sadness, alienation and anger; however, this tension is a proper attribute delineating the transnational subject, whose nomadic identities are in balance between an emotional bond that binds them to their ‘homeland’, a country that exists only in the memory of the grandmothers, and the ‘diaspora space’, a place of new beginning, where they store the hope for a Free Sahara:

However, inside me, I know Western Sahara is my home. I have never seen it but I know it does exist, maybe it does not exist in other people's minds or library books and school maps, but it does exist inside me, inside all the Saharawi and inside all those who believe in justice. Home for me is where I belong, home is a place that will open its arms to me, no matter how good or bad I am. Home is stabilization, security and identity. Home for many people is something tangible; home for us is a dream. Home for you is a reality; home for me is a wish. Home for you is existence; home for me is a struggle. You live in your home; my home lives inside me. 'Where do you want to spend your life, Asria?' my friend asked this question when we were traveling. Before I answered him, I had to explain that I do not really agree that we should have borders; I wish that all people would be able to live together. But first I want to experience that feeling. The feeling of belonging. The feeling that people get when they see me wearing my traditional Melhfa and say to me that I am from Western Sahara not India. I want to witness my family and all Saharawi return to our country; I want to know that all Saharawi in the occupied area live in security. I want to make sure that our next generation will live in peace and stability. I might move to a place where I feel is me, maybe Western Sahara or any other place in the world, because what is important is to live amongst people who you love, and the people who I love live in the refugee camps for that is our home until we get our independence. (Taleb: 2013)

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