

Images of Hope and Despair among Moroccan Diasporic Enclaves Featured in Zakia Khairhoum's the End of My Dangerous Secret

Abdelali Jebbar

ajebbar@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper explores predominant themes of diaspora in Zakia Khairhoum's novel, Nihayat Sirri L-Khateer [The End of My Dangerous Secret]. Taking into account that most Moroccan diasporic literary works share the transnational concern about mediating the voices of subalternised and marginalized identities within both the borders of their ancestral home and the contact zones forged abroad, I find Khairhoum's novel pertaining to the category of Moroccan diasporic literature as it features a dynamic site where different Arab national spheres intersect, playing a crucial part in reproducing and transforming the diasporic subject. The novel revolves around the protagonist, Ghalia, with mobility that is replete with miscellaneous themes, overarched with a tendency to denounce the austere patriarchal tradition in the homeland, with no disdain or lack of faith in the tenet of her own culture. The dimensions of mobility and locality map out a course of analysis that focuses on themes of hope and despair, opening a window of opportunity for investigating forms of cultural encounters that are of paramount importance for understanding the types of constant reproduction and change affecting the concept of diaspora.

Keywords: despair, diaspora, hope, identity, locality, mobility, transnational

Introduction:

In the wake of the Second World War, Morocco was still considered a French and Spanish protectorate. Therefore, Moroccan Migrants to Europe were, in particular, hosted in France as a boost to the French workforce which suffered huge human losses during the war (Lahcen Elyasmini, 2018). This wave of Moroccan immigration, seeking employment either in agriculture or industrial sectors, continued until 1973 Oil Crisis, a date that marked the weakening of the French economy, leading to racism and xenophobia against immigrants (Elyasmini, 2018). Consequently, immigrants started heading towards other European countries such as Holland, Belgium, Germany and Scandinavian countries (Elyasmini, 2018). Most of them sought economic refuge and their later generations are now active participants in the economic, cultural and political life in diaspora. This paper sheds light on an exemplary case of a Moroccan writer who has left Morocco and settled in one of the Scandinavian countries. It focuses on the novel, Nihayat Sirri L-Khateer (Transliterated as The End of My Dangerous Secret) written in Arabic by Zakia Khairhoum (2008), a Morocco-Norwegian writer, who has been living in Norway since 1990. The aim is to explore predominant and

emergent themes of diaspora, covering the transnational concern, via the dimensions of mobility and locality, shared by Moroccan migratory writers to mediate the voices of subalternised and

marginalized identities within the borders of their homeland and the contact zones forged abroad.

The novel as a diasporic text features a dynamic site where different national spheres intersect, playing a crucial part in reproducing and transforming the diasporic subject. It displays a set of Moroccan, Arab and Latin diasporic enclaves dispersed in the regions of the Maghreb, America and Norway. The paper argues that the diasporic experiences lived by the personae in Khairhoum's novel emulate a transnational stream of diasporic conscience that relates different national identities within both virtual and physical spaces of interaction. In this respect, the transnational relationship is impregnated, to use Roben Cohen's feature of diasporai, by "bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of fate." (Roben Cohen, 2008,

p. 7) Cohen's feature of diaspora is useful for determining the diasporic formations in Khairhoum's novel, stressing the various ties that bind them together beyond the national, ethnic, religious or cultural sphere. At this juncture, the voice of the diasporic subject is allowed articulation not only in hazardous trekking, marking recurrent traumatic dispersal from home, but also within virtual or imagined possibilities of travel.

Additionally, the transnational formations displayed throughout Khairhoum's diasporic text should be seen, as suggested by Janine Dahinden, as "the effect of the combination of these two dimensions – mobility and locality –" to provide "interesting insights into the multiplicities of forms of existence." (Janine Dahinden, 2010, p. 51). Dahinden's premise introduces an emergent way of seeing diaspora demarcating its transnational formations within a diasporic sphere that is binded by the dimensions of mobility and locality. Such a demarcating outline serves as a multidirectional space hosting Cohen's perspective on diasporic identities.

The story is told through first-person narration. Ghalia is the omniscient character who meets Oulaya, an Egyptian girl, and recounts her story to her at a cafe in the airport of Copenhagen before flying to Oslo, the capital of Norway. The airport counts as a temporal locality hosting two young ladies of two different nationalities, a transnational context fostered by the bonds of language and culture.ii The plot introduces a complication revolving around typical plights that most Arab girls undergo before getting married, such as the female circumcision and the loss of the hymen. The main character, Ghalia, lives, throughout the

novel, in the illusion of losing her virginity, a tragic plight that haunts her thoughts and accompanies every beat of her heart: on her voyage to Libya through the desert of Algeria or at her arrival in America with Dr. Nabil, who accepted the pretense of marrying her to facilitate her exit from Morocco. Such a feeling of emptiness that comes as a direct response to her assumed loss of the hymen seems to be alleviated when she meets Adel in New York, a character with a compelling presence evoking noble intents acting as a counter-discourse to Samir's detrimental

remarks, which he impulsively expresses as she confides her secret to him in Libya .

The choice of the protagonist, Ghalia, with mobility that is replete with miscellaneous themes of hope and despair, which alternate ad infinitum, overarched with a tendency to denounce the austere patriarchal traditions in the ancestral home, with no disdain or lack of faith in the tenet of her own culture, allows further investigation to the cultural encounters necessary for understanding the types of constant reproduction and change affecting the concept of diaspora. The two major themes, hope and despair, appear as fluctuating emotions overwhelming major instances of alienation, displacement and rejoicement experienced by the personae. Although the prime focus is on the protagonist Ghalia, other personae of transnational character are there to enrich the scene communicated by the diasporic text and allow different cultures and ethnicities to meet along with their local specificities forging a transnational locality.

Images of Despair: Alienation and Displacement

Right from the beginning, Ghalia, born in Morocco of a Sudanese mother and Mauritanian father, mounts a harsh indictment against the customs of Arab communities. More specifically, the 'horrifying' scene of her sister's wedding night, with the women awaiting eagerly the thrill of the hymen blood counts as a tragic status-quo that is maintained throughout the plot. The event is recalled on various occasions and most often conjured up as an inevitable tragedy waiting to happen once Ghalia decides to get married. Khairhoum describes this major source of despair as being a strange ritual in which a test of chastity and honor occurs: The godmothers are awaiting the fateful moment of the male seal in the rite of testing the honor of the bride through drops of blood to announce the line between chastity and impurity, and another thin line separating death and life. The wedding godmothers are knocking on the door with their fists as if they are

in a state of lust to see the spilled blood. Ghalia closed her hands to her ears to block the sound of their frightening voices. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 8).

The scene includes Ghalia's walking back and forth in her room, "she is sometimes biting her lips and sometimes biting her very short nails, and sweat pouring from her forehead and her hands trembling, muttering incomprehensible words. She asks herself, pleading, as if she were the bride." (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 9). This happens because she thinks she lost her virginity at the age of seven when she saw a small spot of blood on her pants. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 12) This incident is seen by Ghalia and her elder sister as a dangerous secret, a nightmare and a source of extreme despair that she has to live with exiled in her own home and among her acquaintances. Her sister's wedding ceremony fuels her sense of being alienated within her domestic space as the image of her 'assumed loss' becomes recurrent and persistent. Ghalia experiences a form of alienation that can be seen as an instance of 'powerlessness'iii, that she feels incessantly like other females within her patriarchal community. Her 'subjective experience of the Moroccan patriarchal tradition is conspicuously displayed through her reaction to the scene of the wedding, which distortedly transforms her home into a locality of displacement with its reductive way of viewing a girl's honor residing in the preservation of her hymen.

The descriptive account of what Ghalia sees, meets and lives throughout the region of the Maghreb is marked with a strong feeling of resentment towards the reigning traditions in the Arab nations. The form of displacement she experiences at home is primarily due to the liberal thoughts she was imbued with during her one-year-stay in the United States. Her recurrent arguments with Dr. Sultan, her father, are confronted with indelible imprints of these liberal thoughts. Outside her national sphere, in some

instances of her forced displacement and whenever she comes across a loyal 'representative' of the patriarchal rules, those imprints spring to action. Her first visit to America taught her how to dream of a distinguished shining future and toil hard to achieve her freedom. She learned how to fight all forms of inferiorization that Arab women tend to face.

On her journey to Libya, via the Algerian desert, she is forced to travel with one of her father's friends, an old man and his young wife, who was vested to keep an eye on her. This character represents a load of taboos and inhibitions, which Ghalia has already faced at home, and are liable to accompany her forcible and traumatic deterritorialisation. She sees him repeatedly beating his wife for the most trivial reasons, a scene that 'intensifies' her state of despondency and challenges meanwhile her quest for liberty.

Being not in a position to change anything at home, the concept of exile in the case of Ghalia becomes much more pertinent to label both her displacement and alienation in her native socio-cultural context. She appears, in various respects, lacking sense of belonging bearing, in a sense, interesting resemblance to Maria, the protagonist in Abdellah Laroui's novel, *Al-Ghorba/The Exile*, who suffers a double form of exile: one imposed by the circumstances of her immigration to France and the other experienced within her family circle (Mouhcine Amar, 2004, p. 113). For Maria, her immigration to France, though being an explicit form of exile, counts as a desired alternative of the probable conjugal subordination at home. Her paces towards emancipation seem to necessitate an audacious refusal of the patriarchal dictates. (Mouhcine Amar, 2004, p. 115). Similarly, Ghalia's possibilities of travel, no matter where she may go, provides her with culminating moments where she can overcome her despair that is sporadically echoed outside the bounds of her tradition.

Within the context of displacement, Ghalia does not show any signs of approval or acceptance of the metropolitan identity. She seems to cling to a stable equivalence of values and ethics that question the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic rules. In her diverse instances of despair, which might fit into the sphere of negative elements of migration, where she is either shocked at the discrepancies overarching Samir's later attitudes to her doubted virginity or tormented with different types of harassment during her stay in Libya, Ghalia is still capable of drawing a firm line of difference between the collective misunderstanding of certain religious tenets, across the national boundaries of Arab territories, and her strong faith in Islam.

As for Ghalia's admiration of America, it does not go beyond the surface realities of the metropolitan space, which signals her unshakable cultural background and hence her immunity to alienation. Criticizing the hostile nature of America when her Latin friend, Locho, got stabbed in his workplace, and her American friend, Angel, the daughter of a politician, got raped, Ghalia soon starts feeling exiled in a space that once was for her the sanctuary of fulfilled hopes and desires. At this specific juncture, the traditional notion of a diasporic subject is destabilized and becomes prone to a series of reformulations and transfigurations. She becomes the transnational incarnate who does not acknowledge the taken-for-granted images that relate the collective misconceptions of human values.

To avoid falling prey to a monochromatic way of seeing, the diasporic subject in question, we may see Ghalia as an alienated subject of cultural transgression, on the one hand, escaping the abuses and the injustices of her ancestral land, and on the other, sympathizing

with those in need for help and solidarity within the transnational culture. The quest for solidarity among the displaced subjects in

diaspora aims at forming a cultural space that would engender organic unity no matter how different their material conditions of displacement are.

The search for a locality that would end Ghalia's cultural displacement is not accomplished through seeking solidarity among diasporic enclaves in America. Other displaced elements are allowed to enter the displacement circle through the gate of the transnational culture, notably wretched selves from within the cosmopolitan sphere who are subjected to forms of stigmatization and denigration. Ghalia's American friend, Angel, who was a victim of rape in her own homeland is a useful example catering for the existence of such home displacement. Khairhoum voices Angel's woesome complaint before Ghalia:

Look at what happened to me. Not only did they rape me, but they also filmed their crime, and I can't even report them to the police for fear of my father...I feel pain [...]I feel am a sexual tool ; I don't feel at ease with my body [...]

I wished I went to the police and report them now, but I can't. This will affect my father's candidature for senator. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 428).

For Ghalia, Angel's plight communicates a fierce image of despair. She sees the world being reduced to a sphere filled with pernicious forms of injustice and humiliation afflicted on women, which necessitates proximity between parents and their adult girls to protect them against any potential danger. Ghalia's acknowledgement of parental guidance to ward off 'the evil spirit of the modern world' neither shakes her refusal of the patriarchal norms spread in her country nor pushes her to scornfully overlook the glittering lights of the American metropole.

Angel seems to suffer the repercussions of home exile, a form of displacement that has sprung to the surface of American reality, uncovering a multiplicity of inhibitions, not, like in the case of Ghalia, imposed by patriarchal traditions, but emanate from her utilitarian 'modern' society. Such a deep form of despair generated within Angel's cultural environment may plunge her into a state of unease, a state of mind that may lead her to the phase of disbelief and denial, where she can redefine herself within the space of solidarity forged within the transnational sphere, probably suggested by Ghalia's sense of empathy.

Images of Hope: Rejoicement

Samir, a driver from Tafrawt, enters the scene at the start of Ghalia's trip from Algeria to Libya to bring some hope and light to the darkness fostered within her psyche by the old man's arrogance and his injustice done to his wife. He appears as a rare beam of hope in one of Ghalia's moments of grief and worry when they stopped at a cafe in a small Algerian town. Khairhoum describes Ghalia's reluctance before she starts socializing with Samir along with his cousin Souhail and his friend Zakaria:

They stood astonished looking at her, a blade in her chest, drawing her soul to go away. She hesitated for a moment and found herself explaining to them her relationship with the old man and his wife. She remains taciturn hiding her worries and secrets, whereas their eyes empty as they are, emanating a myriad of exclamation and question marks, gazing at the old man from time to time. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 42)

Her reticence that precedes her words is in fact a bit of an 'inner intolucation', between those despairing moments, spent as her share of torment, watching the old man mistreating his wife before their arrival to the small Algerian town, and her rejoicing at meeting Samir and his friends. "For the first time, after a day and a night of travel fatigue, she enjoyed her presence among young people talking about different and new topics," (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 42), in a locally hosting temporal amalgam of attitudes and beliefs.

Samir is also a victim of homeland rupture, and he runs his business of car trading from Italy to Libya. He represents a diasporic subject wandering throughout a transnational space orbiting diverse enclaves of diaspora. Such mobility may result in the erasing of the national border that sustains the recognition of the diasporic subject as an identity that is haunted with the idea of returning to the land of origin. This transnational aspect of diaspora, which is also represented by Ghalia and other characters, signals as affirmed by Caren Kaplan, "both positive and negative elements of migration : the destabilization of nationalisms, the production of dynamic border zones, and reconfigurations of identities as well as the hegemonic aspects of globalization and transnational corporate exploitation,"(Kaplan, 1996, p.135).

Reaching a home, for Ghalia, does not authenticate the traditional conception of a potential home coming. For her, home is the most desired hope which none of the localities that once hosted her managed to fulfill. It is a spatial identity that promotes sense of

belonging, a space where her conceptions of freedom are validated and sustained. To avoid any probable misunderstanding of the term, we should consider Ghalia's resort to reading as a possibility of travel where her pursuit of hope/home is by no means a dangerous pursuit. Novels written by different cultural sensitivities communicating plurality of thought were honest companions for Ghalia in her miscellaneous journeys (Tahar Benjelloun and Hemingway's novels as examples). These forms of cultural encounter provide reliable explanation of the nature of reproduction being effected on the diasporic subject.

Ghalia's untiring search for hope outside her ancestral home is manifest in numerous contexts though she gets overwhelmed with frustrating tragic events experienced by her close friends. The way Ghalia reacts to Angel's case of rape exposure, and subsequently to her AIDS infection, shows how calm and assertive she stands before unforeseen matters. She sympathetically speaks to Angel:

Angel, do you know why I supported you? Haven't you wondered why I was the only one who supported you and I was neither paranoid nor willing to let you down. I am like the other people, and I didn't do any injustice to you as did your friends and your close relatives. Do you know why, Angel? Because the strong faith in God makes our hearts pure and generous, ready to side with those in need, lending a hand to them and never letting them down. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 437)

The passage is replete with images of hope and optimism, highly suggestive to Angel of a vast space of cultural alternatives which may not only compensate for her temporal and metaphorical amputation of the social body of her nation, but also challenge the presumption that cultural identity within a certain imaginary nation-state can remain the same. Ghalia's words, in this respect, are so empathetic that they enable her to move closer to Angel and forge a bond based on a shared form of suffering, notably her false belief of losing the hymen.

The concept of cultural identity is also challenged in diverse spatial dimensions throughout Khairhoum's anecdotes delineating instances where emergent spatial identities spring to action, promulgating sense of belonging among the hosted subjectivities who feel nostalgic for their origin(s). New York hosts a myriad of temporal manifestations of different social practices. These practices endow the localities of their occurrence with hyperreal identities that may be seen as either disloyal or subversive of the city's cultural identity. The example of the Lebanese restaurant, where Ghalia was accepted to do a part time job, may

conjure up a diasporic space with a physical fabric intact before the metropolis. Khairhoum

describes the restaurant along with Ghalia's impression. She writes:

They went to the Lebanese restaurant, an elegant Oriental and Arabic restaurant. She feels as if she were in an Arab country or Lebanon. The ringing voice of Fayrouz resonates throughout the place. Antoine (her American friend) went to speak with the restaurant owner about hiring her. She was looking at customers, most of them are Arab and Lebanese families. She felt as if she were in Morocco. She felt nostalgic about the country where she was born and raised. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 405)

We can scent great rejoicing in this anecdote overwhelming Ghalia's visit to the restaurant. The space counts as a carrier of Ghalia's memories, endowing her with a possibility to redefine her diasporic identity. The significant presence of such spatial identity within the metropolis, though representing a form of cultural difference is still seen, to use Homi Bhabha's premise, as a complex act that generates borderline affects and identifications (Crinson, 2002, p. 81). Not dissimilar to this, Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts cites Mark Crinson's analysis of mosques in postcolonial Britain, in which Crinson questions "the formation of cultural identity of diasporic Muslim communities... from within the British nation-state". (Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, p. 11). He explains that "this diaspora mosque, which came into being without change to the building's physical fabric or its function, operates to reclaim colonial history and to reinvent the sign through transformation from Orientalist to diaspora mosque." (Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, p. 11). Closely related to this, the Lebanese Restaurant may disturb familiar layers of egocentric conceptions of the city's metaphor of cultural identity. The existence of an oriental socio-economic dynamism in diaspora, like the case of the Lebanese restaurant, can be challenging enough to the desolate modern life of Americans. The diasporic identities are hosted in a 'space' that allows them to enjoy a certain degree authenticity preserving their cultures intact in the hosting country.

The struggle of hope and despair that Ghalia experiences in her travels and her intermittent stay in both Libya and America ends when she meets Adel, an Arabic name meaning literally someone who is 'just' or 'fair-minded'. This character comes from Norway to visit his brother, Ilyas, the owner of the Lebanese Restaurant in New York, a diasporic subject that is 'summoned' to enrich the transnational space hosted by the American metropolis. His entrance to the scene comes as a man of refreshing condour to make Ghalia's despairing moments disappear and introduce her to an appreciation of life that authenticates

her guiding principles. Ghalia appreciates his kindness and cordial acts as he genuinely verbalizes his feelings towards her, assuring that he will be justice and nobleness to her. (Khairhoum, 2008, p.456). He soon becomes a knight that "lavished on her a little of his wealth and a lot of his soul and his love. He taught her how to believe in life and its generosity." (Khairhoum, 2008, p.460).

At this juncture, hope is suggested in a way that minimizes the twinkling sad truths of the modern life and maximizes, simultaneously, Ghalia's high spirit and warmheartedness. It may also count as a resolution to the inconsistencies that she has seen so far between what exist in reality and what she really longs for. The protagonist, having in mind the painful disappointment caused by Samir, finds necessary to remain careful enough to avoid potential moments of despair. In this regard, Ghalia's hope can be seen as a form of faith-based hope, a concept introduced by James R. Averill and Louise Sundararajan (2004). Stressing that the term 'faith', in this respect, does not refer to "any particular creed, religious or circular," Averill and Sundararajan contend that:

Faith-based hope is usually spawned in situations where the possibility of achieving a goal is slight. In order to hope in seemingly hopeless situations, one needs a belief system that can resolve multiple contradictions between a stark realism that sees no way around the goal block (necessity), on the one hand, and a rebellious spirit that insists that things could be otherwise (possibility), on the other. (Averill and Sundararajan, 2004, p. 7)

Hope is a possibility which seems to win at the end once Ghalia decides to get rid of her burdens. Her burden of the past resides in the illusion of losing her honor and chastity, and it is imposed by the home's backward customs that reduce the honor of the girl to her virginity. Also, there is her burden of the present, represented notably by the hypocrisy blatantly revealed by Samir after spending a pretty long time preaching the virtues of being openminded. To fulfill this hope, Ghalia insists on visiting a gynecologist and runs through the humiliating experience of virginity testing. Khairhoum describes how Ghalia insists to do so in order to turn doubt to certainty:

I have to go to the gynecologist and find out about my case. It is necessary to go to a gynecologist to turn doubt to certainty. Either I am his, or death is mine. I must dispel the fragile clouds and make way for a clearer view. Here I am

sliding again towards my destiny in the theater of life that my fate has drawn, and I do not know what this destiny is or how it will be. (Khairhoum, 2008, p.460)

The clearer view that Ghalia longs for does not only aim to uncover the real nature of her dangerous secret, but it also seeks to subvert, on solid ground, the discourse of patriarchy paving the way for hope to reign supreme over her chronic despair. Ghalia sees that her home inhibitions, which are customs of transnational nature (found in all Arabo-Islamic countries), should be challenged in diaspora and in a manner that would put an end to Arab female forms of self-doubt and insecurity. Once the doctor tells her about her intact hymen she stands exhausted but jubilant. Amid her rejoicing, Ghalia decides to avenge herself against patriarchy represented by "her father, brother, male cousins and even those women who grant men the right to lead the woman to the slaughter bed." (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 464). Her decision to get rid of her virginity "without sexual contact" (Khairhoum, 2008, p.466) is a critical turn where hope triumphs over despair, fostering a festival of rejoicement when Adel ultimately, though knowing about her audacious decision, asks her to marry him. (Khairhoum, 2008, p. 469).

Conclusion:

The End My Dangerous Secret does not only criticize the patriarchal rules in Oriental families, but it also refutes, convincingly, the bleak emptiness of modern life. Through forms of voluntary and forced displacement, the protagonist, Ghalia, shows tremendous amount of perseverance to create diverse possibilities of travel, which would set her free from the inhibitions of Arab communities. However, after her arrival in America, her soul remains wandering through the discrepancies marring her idealized image of the 'modern' society, where she comes to know a form on unrestrainedness unreservedly exerted, counterbalancing her home inhibitions. As a result, the setting of the novel becomes a space of intersected notions of travel and exile, hope and despair, locality and mobility, celebrating the diversity of diaspora and transnationalism.

Notes

i Cohen adds this feature, which defines diaspora as often mobilizing "a collective identity", to William Safran's list of features defining the concept of diaspora. He adds that the "bonds

of language, religion, culture and a sense of fate" endow this transnational relationship with "affective, intimate quality that formal citizenship or long settlement frequently lack," in *Global Diasporas: an Introduction*, pp. 6-7

ii Oulaya expresses her desire to listen to Ghalia's story. She feels no need to tell her own because it would definitely be similar to Ghalia's story, which is supposed to tell the details of escaping from a society that lives in backwardness and darkness towards an alternative that suits them both, in *Nihayatu Sirri L-Khateer*, p. 3.

iii Powerlessness here is one of the "four empirically measurable forms of experience of alienation", which are powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement, suggested by Robert Blauner (1964) to apply alienation "to the subjective experience of modern life," in Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (eds.). *Key Concepts in Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 19.

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