

From North Africa to Spain: Ramito de Hierbabuena by Gerardo Muñoz Lorente

The history of Europe has been one of masses of people moving around or going through. The 20th century is no exception with the needs arising after World War II and authoritarian regimes implanted East and West. During this time the migratory movements were mainly to North and Central Europe. The situation was modified when former emigrants began to return, as authoritarian regimes made their transition to democracy (Kofman 56). In the case of Spain, exiled Republicans started returning to a country that denied them for decades shortly after Franco's death in November 1975. On top of this, in the past two decades, according to Eleonore Kofman et al., "southern European states (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) have been transformed from societies of emigration to immigration" (45). This reversal has been possible for a variety of reasons, but mainly due to an "increasing prosperity" which produced "rising wages and new openings for migrant workers in specific sectors of the labor market" (King 5). Thus, people in need of means to support themselves and their families have been flocking Europe.

The social reality of Spain has undergone a dramatic change with this reversal of the migratory movement, since, as the novelist Juan Goytisolo puts it "Spain stopped being a poor and distressed country, bled by successive economical and political immigration waves, to become a different one, a magnet for immigrants" ("Pájaro que ensucia su propio nido" 33). Russell King states that in 1997 forty per cent of the total immigrants in Spain were from European countries, retirement settlements, and there were several important Latin-American communities, "partially explained by ties of history, language and culture" (6). However, "the prime sending country for Spain is

Morocco” (Mendoza 47); with Moroccan nationals accounting for one in seven, they are the most important immigrant nationality in the country (King 6). Increased legal difficulties, prompts many of them, and Sub-Saharan, to make it illegally, guarded by night, in precarious floating devices, “pateras,” considering that the distance between the African coasts to Southern Spain is only 14 km (close to 9 miles). Local and national authorities, together with the Red Cross and other non-governmental humanitarian organizations are employing numerous resources to care for these people as they reach Spanish soil undernourished, cold and, in many cases, sick or pregnant. Even though most of them are returned to their countries of origin later on, the truth remains that there is a large number who has made it into Spanish cities in a brief period of time. The researcher Cristóbal Mendoza states that in 1980 there were 4,067 legally resident Moroccans for the whole of Spain, whereas in 1997, legal Moroccan residents number 77,189 (44), out of 538,984 (King 7). More recently, Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez Melgosa give the number of 234,937 Moroccans out of a total of 1,109,060 immigrants in 2001 (165), figures outdated by now after the regularization of many illegal immigrants with the changes in immigration laws, performed under the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in 2005. These migratory movements have changed the somehow monochromatic face of a country locked in itself for most of the 20th century, and they will continue to do so since the birthrate went up to 1.24 in 2001, the highest since 1993 (1.27), thanks to immigrant women (elmundo.es par 1-2).

Obviously, these demographic changes have had a social and cultural impact. The new reality that the country has been facing for the past years has found its way into cultural manifestations such as cinema and literature, some of which portrays the

conflicts arising from these migratory movements. The changes have been too sudden and too rapid, and not all sectors of Spanish constituency are ready to embrace or even assimilate the diversity that these waves of people brought with them. Some attitudes in real life indicate that racism lives buried within the country. This racism, present in some of the living and working conditions with which this people have to cope, can also be perceived in novels. According to Daniel Gier, immigrants start to be a presence in the Spanish detective novel as early as the late 70s, connected to the underworld in Madrid and Barcelona. However, their appearance in these novels is only as voiceless, marginal characters contributing to the degradation of the society. Out of the twenty-three novels published between 1977 and 2000 he has studied, Gier mentions only two in which some of these characters are allowed to express their opinion. At the same time, there is hardly any criticism to the negative realities that they encounter, although some degree of compassion can be noticed sometimes. Therefore, these novels help to prolong the negative stereotyping already present in society, without any attempt to understand the immigrants' point of view or the reasons that forced them to leave their country of origin.

Contrary to the aforementioned novels, in 2001 Gerardo Muñoz Lorente published Ramito de Hierbabuena (Mint Sprig), a lengthy love story in which the main characters, Habib and Maimuna, have to overcome all sort of obstacles to achieve their dream. These are related to a variety of things: Muslims traditions that prevent women from having a say in important decisions in their lives (such as choosing who they marry), strict family structures, honor codes, poverty, powerful people that prevent Habib from getting a well-paid job in Morocco, forcing him to look for a better future in Spain, the difficulties to immigrate legally and the trading practices established between

people's wishes and greed combined with lack of scruples. Habib reaches the Spanish coasts with the help of a Moroccan drug-dealer, "El Holandés," ("The Dutchman"), for whom he has worked as a collection agent. However, when Maimuna asks him for help to join Habib in Spain, she falls victim of El Holandés' greed who sells her to his partner in the drug and women trafficking business in Spain, El Americano, ("The American"). Although she manages to escape from the demented pervert to whom she is sold in turn, Lalo, she fails to find Habib because the police had deported her. In her second attempt, she dies at sea. When her corpse is found, the police links her to the unsolved cases of other two Moroccan girls killed a few years earlier; all three bodies display the same tattoos and similar marks of violence. Eusebio Jara, police captain in Seville, reopens the investigation attempting to find their killer with new information provided by Habib as he approached the police station to identify Maimuna's body after seeing her image in a news report.

With this novel, Muñoz is making an effort to correct the ignorance and indifference that the majority of Spaniards is showing towards this new element populating the society; ignorance and indifference that Juan Goytisolo has been denouncing since the decade of the 80s. By focusing on Habib and Maimuna's lives and devoting a great deal of pages to express their subjectivity, Muñoz's novel allows the Spanish reader to learn about their desires, future plans, concerns and all the emotions they undergo in their lives and the difficult learning experiences they face. Nonetheless, since the focalization fluctuates all throughout the novel from character to character and to the narrator, there is a wide variety of opinions relating to "the Other" from both shores of the Mediterranean. It reflects Tzvetan Todorov's position as he affirms that

“others are also ‘I’s: subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view —according to which all of them are out there and I alone am in here-- separates and authentically distinguishes from myself” (3). Therefore, there are as many differentiated others as points of view; however, in this case of culture clash, religion is very much involved. As Kofman et al. mark: “Islam becomes the primary axis of difference and the basis for denoting immigrants” (9) from the European side. Habib, in his letters to Maimuna, complains constantly about the Spaniards’ ignorance and their inability to differentiate among the diversity of groups who live in North Africa, noting how the general word “moors” (moros) is used to designate all of them. Nevertheless, all throughout the novel, the Muslim characters use the term “irumien”, pronounced eromein, to talk about Europeans or Spaniards referring to their Christianity. Therefore, from both sides, the general religious term is used to group collectivities differentiated by national, historical, cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies.

Since how each individual sees the “Other” is linked to a personal point of view, it is also related to different ideologies. There is not one single vision about any national collectivity, which only proves the complexity of the situation when need forces both groups to live together without time to adapt. From the Moroccan perspective, Spaniards range from devil to friendly neighbor with a variety of positions between these two. For the more orthodox Muslims, the Spaniards, or Christians in general, represent sin; to be in contact with them leads to a licentious kind of life that ends up separating the former from their religious traditions and the oblivion of their correct way of life. Others like Hakim, Habib’s uncle, view their proximity with the Spaniards, in the Spanish North African town of Melilla, positively as they can benefit from trading with them and thus,

are able to better provide for their families. For Habib himself, Christians in general are arrogant people who think themselves better than Muslims without much, or any, knowledge of their culture and history. He is not a very religious person, but this ignorance bothers him. Although he does not want much to do with the Spaniards, after having worked for two years in Melilla, he finds some positive things within the Spanish city, which soften his opinion somehow. He is quite impressed by the respect that cultural minorities like his (the amazige) get, more than in Morocco. The amazige history and language are taught in public schools and some Spanish politicians got the European Community to recognize his language as a minority one spoken in Europe. Even though his sympathies are not completely reversed, he admits that his minority culture is less oppressed within the Spanish African borders than in his own country. It turns out that the Spaniards living in African soil are more respectful than he had imagined; to his surprise, there is even a Muslim political party. The situation in the mainland is somewhat different, though. He perceives that Spaniards in the Peninsula manifest hostility towards Maghrebians in general. He admits that the behavior of some people who engage in illicit activities helps this racist feeling to grow; however, he points out that this comes not from Moroccans, but from people from Algeria. A different “Other” comes into play here, an “Other” who does not enjoy Habib’s favor either, albeit for different reasons that go beyond the scope of this study. In any case, Habib blames for the situation the Spaniards’ inability to distinguish among the different cultures from North Africa; their ignorance is at the core of racism in Spain from his perspective. Regardless of his opinion, he has to make the most of the possibilities in this country since all doors are closed for him in his homeland. It is a matter of survival. Thus, the

position towards the Spaniards varies accordingly to religious beliefs and monetary needs.

The situation for Moroccan women is not much better. The general opinion among the male voices is that any Moroccan woman who leaves for Spain ends up being a prostitute. There are several cases depicted in the novel that prove this to be a fact, not only in the Peninsula, but also in Melilla. Notwithstanding, their own countrymen who traffic with drugs and women provoke this situation. The language used to refer to these women as “goods” or “merchandise” is completely derogatory. In spite of this negativity, for Maimuna, Spain represents the possibility of having a life with Habib, something she has been denied by her own family who decided to marry her with a man forty-some years her senior, only because of his wealth and the benefit they will get from the dowry he is to hand Maimuna’s family upon the wedding day. In a world of poverty, money takes precedence over feelings and desires. The young lovers do not move to Spain on their own will; it is material needs and constraining traditions that push them to do so in pursue of a life of happiness together. Maimuna’s arrival turns out to be a nightmarish experience at the hands of El Holandés, El Americano and the demented Lalo; all three with different nationalities, namely, a Moroccan, an American, and a Spaniard. It can be said, then, that nationality does not play a major role in Muñoz Lorente’s depiction of unscrupulous characters. As she manages to escape from Lalo, she finds people who help her overcome the traumatic experience she went through. Throughout her endeavor, she finds out that the social reality that will face them in Spain is not ideal, but there is hope because there is solidarity, even if not from all sectors of society.

With regards to the way Spaniards see Moroccans, there are also different perspectives, which reveal something about the individual characters, representing different positions within Spanish society. In opposition to the conscious verbal manifestations of the Moroccans' opinions regarding the Spaniards, the attitudes of the latter toward the former are shown in their interaction with Maimuna, for the most part. Some of them definitely show the ignorance about which Habib talks in the novel, and Goytisolo in real life. Clearly so when Maimuna is hitchhiking in her escape from Lalo and the driver who picks her up, thinks she is a Gypsy, a minority that has lived in Spain far too long without achieving complete social integration and respect. In spite of his ignorance about both ethnic groups, he is willing to take her because he believes she is running away in a case of domestic violence, judging by her appearance. In this sense, the driver seems to be most sensitive to this problem. Regardless of what is considered the general opinion about Moroccans, Maimuna finds people willing to help her. All the more as they learn about her situation, as it happens with Fali and his friend, Melchor. Fali gives her a place to stay until she recovers from Lalo's abuse. With time and getting to know her, he falls in love, but aware of Maimuna's love for Habib, Fali respects her and her wishes. At the same time, Fali's aunt, the owner of a family-run motel where they all live, accepts to accommodate Maimuna in the beginning because it is quite obvious that she needs help. However, the aunt does not feel very comfortable when she realizes that her nephew is in love with her. At this point she tells Maimuna she has to leave, an interracial relationship is more than Fali's aunt is prepared to accept, even though she has not seen Fali this happy for a long time. From her point of view, this kind

of closeness represents some sort of a threat. Fali himself represents the sectors of society aware of the debt incurred by the Spanish culture toward the Arab one.

It is not by chance that their friendship develops in Granada where the Arabs lived for eight centuries enriching the culture as testified, among other things, by the architectural wonders that still remain in place. During the three weeks that Maimuna spends in Granada Fali takes her to all the historical sights while telling her all the stories behind each one of them, but he distorts some narrations if he feels that the legends are not sympathetic to her culture or depict a reality too brutal. He also hides facts from the Christian side of history when he feels those are shameful and could influence negatively Maimuna's opinion. Thus, Fali overcomes any prejudice and sees Maimuna as a beautiful human being with whom he falls in love. She is aware of his feelings and is thankful for his respectful demeanor towards her. So, she gets to experience both sides of the coin, the bad with Lalo and the good with Fali. Apart from the distorted historical perspective that Fali presents to her, Maimuna also learns about the Moroccan community living in Granada in good terms with the Spaniards. Her experiences in this city are such that she is convinced some of her acquaintances there would help her and Habib to find a place for themselves. She is hopeful, after all.

The most disturbing attitude toward this "Other" is represented within the police force (la guardia civil). In opposition to captain Eusebio Jara who is the strongest defendant of the rights of the Moroccan girls killed, his superiors seem to have a different opinion. Jara is disgusted by the killings and by the lack of respect the perpetrator showed in the way he killed them and disposed of their bodies, but also by his superiors' attempt to end the investigation without getting to the bottom of it. For him, these were

young beautiful girls brutally tortured and murdered who deserve justice. When Maimuna's corpse appears in Tarifa, he gets the information needed to produce a positive result in identifying the perpetrator of all three assassinations and he pursues it, even if he has to argue with his boss to get permission to do so. His immediate supervisor is not that concerned with the reasons to put an abrupt end to the inquiry; he just follows orders from above. Unfortunately, the murderer turns out to be a member of a prominent family of Army officials and Jara is pressured not to reveal his identity to protect the family's reputation. After all, Jara is told that nothing good can come out of revealing it: Lalo, the demented killer, has been in a vegetative state since Maimuna injured him in her escape and he has been secluded in a nursing home since then. From this point of view, nobody wins if the truth is unveiled and justice has already been done, even if secretly. After hearing the whole story behind the killings, Jara faces a difficult dilemma since Lalo is related to his best friend, who is also ranked higher up than Jara in the force. For a moment, the reader is led to believe that the captain is going to be a real hero and oppose the system, because he punches his friend. However, he ends up being just human and gives in, accepting the promotion in exchange for his silence. Jara clears his conscience by helping Habib to transport Maimuna to be buried in the Rif and to go back to Spain, legally this time. As economical needs took precedence over feelings in Morocco, social status with all that it implies takes precedence over human rights in Spain.

From the Spaniards' point of view, the novel presents a variety of positions reflecting, as Todorov says, that: "the relation to the other is not constituted in just one dimension" (185). There are those who live together with the Moroccans, but keeping the distance, like Fali's aunt; those, like Fali, who embrace the contributions of the Arab

culture and make no distinction between themselves and this “Other”; those who do not think of Moroccans as deserving the same rights as the Spaniards because they are imagined “as inferior, since [they are] different from us” (Todorov 76); and those who, like Jara, think of them as equal human beings, but give in to peer or social pressure, unable to fight the system all by themselves. These many different stands reflect the heterogeneity within Spanish society resulting, up to some degree at least, from the pace at which the changes have occurred, the inability of all sectors of society to assimilate them and their lack of familiarity with the reality that forces people to leave their country behind.

This lack of knowledge is counterbalanced by the omniscient narrator who incorporates abundant information about Morocco, its history, the internal divisions among the different ethnic groups that live in the country, different languages spoken and traditions within these groups. By incorporating all this historical and sociological aspects, the novel does much more than to narrate a love story: it attempts to make up for that dread ignorance providing all that knowledge from a very respectful position. At the same time, by converting that abstract entity of immigrants into real people with concerns and wishes similar to everybody else’s, it tries to shake off the indifference and hostility that seems to impregnate some sectors of Spanish society which, unfortunately, is being numbed by too many cases of nameless people dying in its coasts repeatedly. Telling the personal story of Habib and Maimuna, it humanizes the abstraction in an effort to make Spanish readers see the similarities more than the differences. Notwithstanding, the novel also presents a multifaceted image of the global reality: the problems are much more complex than the relationship between different national identities, poverty being a

crucial cause, but also the disregard for human life portrayed in the trafficking business conducted by Moroccan themselves. Therefore, it is not only a problem of racism, although this does exist and should be eradicated. In contrast to what Gier observes in the study mentioned before, Muñoz Lorente gives these immigrants a voice to be heard and does not link them only to the underworld; even if some of them belong to this realm, the vast majority is trying to escape from difficult circumstances. It could be argued that Ramito de Hierbabuena falls within what Roberta Johnson calls a “social novel” when analyzing modernist novels written by Spanish female authors at the beginning of the 20th century. By this, Johnson designates a “mode that focuses on interpersonal relations within formal and informal social parameters” (vii-viii). Even if it is not very innovative aesthetically, Ramito de Hierbabuena presents a theme that Spanish society needs to address.

Notes

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