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Lehdia Mohamed Dafa and the Gendered Borders in Hispano-Saharawi Literature

Las mujeres de la República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD) son representadas a menudo como símbolos de la soberanía y la identidad saharauis. Basándose, por un lado, en el concepto de la poética fronteriza y, por otro, en la crítica feminista poscolonial, este ensayo indaga las formas en que la escritora hispano-saharaui Lehdia Mohamed Dafa cuestiona las fronteras nacionales saharauis que se trazan simbólicamente con y sobre los cuerpos femeninos. Asimismo, examina las estrategias que adopta Mohamed Dafa para apartarse de las representaciones de las saharauis como emblemas de la nacionalidad y, en cambio, reinventarlas como ciudadanas con identidades diferenciadas.

Palabras clave: *poética fronteriza, género, identidad nacional, Sáhara Occidental, el cuerpo femenino*

Women from the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) are often portrayed as symbols of Saharawi sovereignty and identity. However, there is a growing echo of voices against the conflation of women and the Saharawi nation. Drawing on border poetics and postcolonial feminist criticism, this essay analyzes the ways in which Hispano-Saharawi writer Lehdia Mohamed Dafa challenges the boundaries of the Saharawi nation that are symbolically traced with, and upon, women's bodies. It also examines the ways in which Mohamed Dafa departs from the notion of Saharawi women as emblems of nationhood and, instead, reimagines them as citizens with differentiated identities.

Keywords: *border poetics, gender, national identity, Western Sahara, women's bodies*

Women from the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) are often portrayed as the cornerstone of Saharawi society. Following the failed Spanish decolonization of Western Sahara, and its subsequent occupation

by Morocco, accounts of Saharawis fleeing the war with Morocco reveal some of the ways in which idealized representations of Saharawi women have been co-opted into the narrative of Saharawi national identity. For example, stories that shine a spotlight on Saharawi women as the hands that set up the refugee camps in the bare Tindouf desert, constructing shelter with their *melhfas*, their traditional wear, before humanitarian-aid tents arrived, symbolically fuse their bodies with the camps and Saharawi identity. Furthermore, as the ones who got away from Western Sahara to bring the young, the elderly, and the infirm to safety during the exodus in the 1970s, Saharawi women also symbolize the space from which they were displaced: they represent the memory of that faraway place from which Saharawis fled. They form a link to the "home" to which Saharawis in exile hope to return. Additionally, women's acts of resistance in the liberation struggle from Spain, and during the war with Morocco, have been portrayed as manifestations of their nomadic character (Lippert 637-42). This furthers the notion of Saharawi women as incarnations of their homeland. Such representations of Saharawi women are reproduced not only in sovereigntist propaganda and development discourse (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 67-69; Martin-Márquez 247), but also in various forms of creative expression, such as contemporary Hispano-Saharawi literature. There is, however, a growing echo of dissenting voices, particularly of women, against the conflation of Saharawi women and what is perceived as an ahistorical notion of national belonging. One such voice is Lehdia Mohamed Dafa, whose writing dislodges the image of empowered Saharawi women from its association with assertions of Saharawi sovereignty and identity and, instead, realigns it with citizenship claims. Using border poetics as an analytical lens, and with assistance from postcolonial feminist criticism, this essay examines the ways in which Mohamed Dafa challenges the boundaries of the Saharawi nation that are symbolically traced with women and their bodies, and reimagines them, instead, as citizens with differentiated identities and sociopolitical claims. To this end, my discussion of Mohamed Dafa's writing from her blog *Democracia Saharaui* will be preceded by the following: an explanation of the rationale for applying concepts of border poetics to notions of Saharawi borders and their creative representation; an analysis of the gendered renditions of the boundaries of Saharawi identity in contemporary Hispano-Saharawi literature; and some illustrations of the growing opposition to the conflation of women's bodies and the Saharawi nation.

Conventional notions of national borders as static lines in the sand cannot adequately account for Saharawi national identity due to the ambiguity of Saharawis' territorial status. The SADR, variously described as

a "refugee state" (Smith 26), a "state-in-exile," and an "extraterritorial state" (Fernández-Molina and Ojeda-García 91, 84), is not located within a discrete sovereign territory, as can be inferred from the aforementioned designations. Instead, its claimed population is dispersed over Western Sahara, most of which is currently occupied by Morocco, and over Mauritania, Spain, and the refugee camps near Tindouf in Algeria, where the Polisario, the governing body of the SADR, is headquartered. The boundaries of the Saharawi nation are further complicated by the movement of Saharawi people, capital, merchandise, and information across the above-mentioned locations, despite the barriers to mobility that are posed by the conditions of occupation and displacement. The refugee camps near Tindouf, for example, have been described as a place where people and goods are constantly on the move due to trade and migratory activities in relation to Spain and neighbouring regions such as Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara itself (Wilson 9). Indeed, the lives of some refugees straddle a number of these regions. During a visit to the Dakhla Refugee Camp in 2016, I became aware that some Saharawi camp residents, who were also Mauritanian, Spanish, or Algerian nationals, had residences in at least one of the above-mentioned locations as well.

This national territorial complexity, however, is not evident in cartographic representations of Saharawi identity. Maps of Western Sahara are often based on the United Nations-sanctioned, internationally recognized boundaries of the disputed region. On such maps, the northern border with Morocco is often rendered in broken lines to indicate that it is a disputed demarcation. Some maps also represent one of the most visible territorial markings of the forty-nine years of conflict over the territory: the berm, also known as the "wall of shame," that meanders from the northeastern border with Morocco to the southwestern border with Mauritania, dividing the country into the Moroccan-controlled areas and the Polisario-controlled "liberated territories." However, the maps mainly coincide with colonial-era cartographic imaging of what was formally known as Spanish Sahara, although a few recent illustrations expand the territorial reach of the Saharawi nation by including the area south of Tindouf in Algeria where the Saharawi refugee camps are located (Rodríguez Jiménez ffep; Martínez Lillo, et al. 11; San Martín xiv). Furthermore, none of these maps account for the many Saharawis, such as the Hispano-Saharawi writers, who reside in locations outside Western Sahara and the refugee camps. The unyielding lines of belonging and exclusion found in maps, and other "visible, often linear, and generally institutionalized lines, fences, and walls" (Konrad 1) are, however, subject to transformation in creative representations, where they can be contested,

replicated, or reshaped. In the latter representations, the dynamic nature of Saharawi territorial and national identity is better understood from the perspective of theories that view borders as symbolic outcomes of socio-political processes of border construction (Kolossov and Scott 2), or as "socio-territorial constructs reflecting the discourses and practices of national identity and bordering" (Agnew 399). In the field of literary studies, border poetics, which explores the narrative and symbolic constructions of spatial borders, provides such a prism as it has been formulated to take into account the notion of "borders as forms of representation" (Schimanski and Wolfe 10). Border poetics is a critical response to the narrative dimension of the concept of border and, as such, it focuses on the processes of border creation and negotiation in aesthetic form. Furthermore, as Schimanski has demonstrated, border poetics serves to interpret the "border figures" ("Crossing and Reading" 59), that is the rhetorical forms of socio-spatial limits, that represent not only borders but also their impact and the actions of those who control or cross them. From the foregoing, and with the understanding that borders are not a given and that they are subject to ongoing construction within a society, contemporary Hispano-Saharawi writing is viewed in this study as a narrative act of bordering or as "borderwork" (Schimanski, "Reading from the border" 67; Rumford 170). Borderwork is used here, as it is by Chris Rumford, to denote acts of bordering that are undertaken by society and that are not necessarily located at territorial boundaries, or at the usual institutionalized border demarcation zones, but rather are dispersed throughout the community (Rumford 170-71).

According to David Newman, "[i]t is at the level of narrative, anecdote and communication that borders come to life … [and b]order narratives reflect the diverse experiences and meanings which borders have for the individual" (152). Similarly, the conflictual Saharawi border with Morocco comes to life in myriad formulations of Saharawi identity and sovereignty in contemporary Hispano-Saharawi writing. For example, Bahia Mahmud Awah draws on the Draa river in the south of Morocco to construct an "epistemological border" (Schimanski, "Crossing and Reading" 56), beyond which, from a Saharawi perspective, the unknown and the threatening other are located. In a bid to illustrate Saharawi sovereignty over the land that is currently claimed and controlled by Morocco, Mahmud Awah alludes to an anecdote in Saharawi lore that portrays the river as a natural border that is so inviolable that, historically, Moroccans who died in conflicts with Saharawis were not buried on Saharawi soil but rather handed over to their compatriots across the river (Mahmud Awah, *Tiris: rutas literarias* 24). By recalling that anecdote, Mahmud Awah reinstates Western Sahara's

northern border (which is erased in Moroccan maps) and shifts it further north, by replacing its imaginary line with a topographical feature. In Zahra Hasnaui's laconically titled "El muro," on the other hand, the Moroccan berm that undermines Saharawis' sense of territorial integrity is subjected to narrative effacement. In the poem, the wall as such is never mentioned:

Solía
mirar
la niña
al este
las estrellas.

Esa noche
la nube ocre
cubrió sus astros. (Hasnaui 69)

The cloud that obscures the vision of the girl in her quest to see the stars in the east could nevertheless be seen as a metaphor for the wall. The image evokes the notion of Saharawis in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, on the western side of the wall, separated from family and loved ones, symbolized by the stars, in the Saharawi-controlled territory on the wall's eastern side. These narrative acts of reaffirming Saharawis' sovereignty and restoring wholeness to their national and territorial identity are replicated in much of Hispano-Saharawi writing in ways that rely on border figures in the form of women and their bodies.

In several instances, particularly in the work of the predominantly male Saharawi writers, women embody the borders and the landmarks that are meant to set Saharawis apart from the threatening other and render the land, through which the Moroccan wall runs, whole again. In this vein, women as border figures, or as metaphors of national differentiation, exude the pristine beauty and perfection that are associated with idealized mothers and female lovers, two recurrent renditions of the longed-for territory in Saharawi literature. For example, in one of Limam Boisha's well-known poems, which begins, "Me pregunta un viajero / qué significa galb" ("Galb" 100), the location of Tiris, the region that is often used as the metonym of the homeland in Hispano-Saharawi literature, is indicated by a number of feminized landmarks. The poetic voice points to various hills on the Saharawi landscape as follows:

Digo yo, por ejemplo,
que Miyek es un lunar
en el vientre de esta tierra.

Que Ziza, por ejemplo,
es pecho en lengua bereber,
……
Un galb puede ser por ejemplo,
el nombre de una muchacha
esculpida
entre las pestañas de una cueva. (Boisha, "Galb" 100-01)

Similarly, Mahmud Awah appears to trace the silhouette of a lover onto the contested territory in his poem "La novia del mar," as he evokes a Western Sahara that is being contemplated by a colonial explorer:

Esta novia de la mar y del desierto
también la contempló hermosa,
caminando descalza
……...
otro amante que se llamó
Emilio Bonelli. (*Versos refugiados* 41)

Meanwhile, the poetic voice in Luali Lehsan's "Tiris," seeking to flee the depths of despair to find uterine containment and security in Tiris, laments:

Quiero huir del vientre
de esta noche ajena.
Dormir un sueño
sin primaveras postergadas,
sin cláusulas de perdón incumplidas,
y despertarme en tu vientre, Tiris. (138)

By drawing on the reproductive mother and female lover tropes to shape the Saharawi landscape, poems such as the above seek to establish a primeval, and hence indisputable relationship, between Saharawi society and the land from which their exodus originated in the 1970s.

Additionally, in similar works, Saharawi women, their bodies, and their labour, function as "umbilical objects" (Castillo 124) that connect Saharawi exiles to their homeland, while at the same time signifying the border between exile and home. In effect, women serve to mark the borderline between the place where many Saharawis are spatially located (for example, the refugee camps and Spain) and the place where they want to be, Western Sahara. Debra Castillo describes "umbilical objects" as follows: "objects from other times, other places [that] … create contiguities but also by their nature define the distance itself. Metaphorically tying the

immigrant to the motherland, they are lifelines, umbilical cords" (124). Although such objects are material objects in Castillo's use of the concept, certain Saharawi cultural objects centred around women function in a similar fashion. In the Saharawi case, recurrent cultural objects in contemporary writing include the concept of women's solidarity and cooperation known as *tuiza*; the female-centred traditional dwelling, the *jaima*; and the *melhfa*, which is the traditional women's clothing. Like Castillo's umbilical objects, these Saharawi cultural objects are tropes of exceptionalism that are used to mark the distinctions between Saharawis and others, particularly their rivals for the ownership of their territory. They also serve to memorialize the homeland from Saharawi places of exile.

Thus, for example, *tuiza* features in Limam Boisha's collection of prose and poetic renditions of Saharawi heritage, where that tradition is portrayed through a circle of women joyously and collaboratively engaged in supporting one another to set up a *jaima*: "Ellas se unen y ayudan a la más necesitada a coser su nueva jaima si acaba de formar familia, o a repararla y levantarla si el viento la ha descuartizado … *Tuiza* es fraternidad. El ambiente laboral es festivo, siempre pletórico de energías, conversaciones y bromas" (*Ritos de jaima* 29). In addition to being significant as a Saharawi tradition, *tuiza* is also important in Saharawi lore as the epitome of nomadic women's sense of solidarity and resourcefulness that enabled Saharawi women to build the refugee camps with their bare hands and their *melhfas* during the exodus. In this regard, the *melhfa*, another symbol of Saharawi difference, is fundamental in the narrative of nation-building. The outfit, which consists of a single length of fabric that wraps around the body and over the head, has multiple layers of interconnected meanings linking women and their bodies to Saharawi territory. For example, it is upheld as a distinct form of dressing that distinguishes Saharawi women from Moroccan women. Furthermore, it symbolizes the integrity of Saharawi culture, particularly in the globalized context of increasing transcultural flows of people, information and diverse allegiances (Almenara Niebla and Ascanio Sánchez 21). These meanings are further strengthened by the exodus stories that tell of the ways in which strong, capable, and independent-minded Saharawi women put up the first *jaimas* in the Tindouf refugee camps with their own *melhfas* (Morales Soler, et al. 264-65). Symbolically, the *jaima* features not only as home but also as a portable representation of the safe homeland, the motherland, so to speak, that has been left behind. In Mohamed Ali Ali Salem's poem, "Atardecer en Mahbes," dedicated to the memory of the poet's grandmothers and mother, the *jaima* is such a space, where a child crawls on the matting in the dwelling while his mother prepares couscous amidst her daydreams and his grandmother

recites prayers with her Qur'anic beads (158-59). Just as Castillo's umbilical objects "remind us of experiences, and provoke stories, stories that in turn require an audience" (124), in Saharawi writing, the above cultural objects also tell stories. They tell stories of border crossing and border making that place women front and centre in the narrative of threatened Saharawi sovereignty.

The representation of Saharawi women in the national identity project also replicates a well-documented strategy for signaling collective belonging in a national, state, ethnic, or racial grouping. In the "[m]ythical unity of national 'imagined communities' which divides the world between 'us' and 'them,'" Nira Yuval-Davis writes, "[w]omen often come to symbolize the national collectivity, its roots, its spirit [and] its national project" (627). This is the case especially when there is an urgent need to assert sovereignty or to underscore territorial boundaries. Under these circumstances, values founded on heterogeneity are suspended and any internal boundaries that may exist are absorbed into the ties that bind all to a mother/land. Such is the case in the context of Saharawis' displacement, where their territory is said to have produced resilient women who are also the guardians of the material and symbolic integrity of the region. Florence Stratton reminds us that the "African nation as woman" trope is not original. Rather, "it is a literary commonplace or topos, a recurring feature in a tradition that can be traced back at least as far as the Negritude movement of the 1930s" (112). In examining works of literature that emerged from the struggles for independence in the twentieth century, Stratton identified the following features of the trope: "The speaker is invariably male, the addressee always a woman. She is pure physicality – always beautiful and often naked. Her body takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund, nurturing mother; and it is frequently associated with the African landscape" (113).

Various iterations of that trope, described as a "pot of culture" that "analogizes woman to traditional values or a bygone culture" (Stratton 112), are akin to the Saharawi umbilical cultural objects that link back to spatially or chronologically distant ideas of a place of belonging. Whereas those umbilical objects may serve to celebrate some Saharawis' sense of sovereignty, they obscure the formulations of new differentiated Saharawi subject positions that do not conform to homogenized territorial and national identities and the roles assigned to women in that context. They overlook counter-hegemonic sociopolitical claims, such as those that can be found in various Saharawi women's online groups. For example, *Desmaquillando tabúes*, an online group, many of whose members live in Spain but who regularly travel to the refugee camps, enacted a graphic

unmooring of women's bodies from the Saharawi nation through their social media campaign "#Ns-Sh" or "#NoSoyMenosSaharaui." The campaign, which was meant to challenge monolithic and hegemonic ideas of Saharawi national identity, inspired several statements of alternative or transgressive positions, many of which were written on a bare body.[1] Amnat Thawra – Hijas de la Revolución, another transnational Saharawi women's organization which maintains the collective blog *El rincón de la mujer saharaui*, also confronts nationalistic depictions of Saharawi women through posts that address a wide range of concerns and issues, including sexual orientation, reproductive rights, and freedom of movement and association.[2] Furthermore, more than a decade prior to the current concerns being raised by some Saharawi women, the short-lived group *Wurud Asahara/Flores del desierto* challenged the official version of Saharawi women's political power. The group dismissed their government's claims in that regard as "un espejismo más en el desierto," pointing to the fact that, at the time, there was only one woman on the National Secretariat, and she was also the "primera dama" (*Wurud Asahara/Flores del Desierto*). These women's groups are representative of Saharawi women who are redefining "themselves as political subjects by making demands for social justice and recognition as political subjects with 'a right to have rights'' (Rygiel 814). They are making citizenship claims that require a narrative decoupling of their bodies from the nation-building agenda. Lehdia Mohamed Dafa takes on that narrative challenge of disrupting the national imaginations of a homeland that are tightly woven with idealized women and their bodies.

Mohamed Dafa, like a number of the previously cited Saharawi writers, is part of the secondary diaspora from the refugee camps, with which she continues to maintain contact, and lives in Spain, where she also practices as a physician. Although her work has appeared in anthologies containing works by fellow writers, such as *Don Quijote, el azri de la badia saharaui*, edited by Mahmud Awah and Moya, she maintains creative distance from her peers through an independent online presence in the form of her blog *Democracia Saharaui: Un blog de análisis y relatos a favor de la democracia, la libertad y la justicia para los saharauis***.** Additionally, unlike many Hispano-Saharawi writers, her claims regarding democracy and freedom are not limited to denouncing Morocco. In one of her posts on *Democracia Saharaui*, she points out that while the Saharawi cause is a fundamental unifier, its continued relevance requires the creation of:

> Un verdadero Estado de Derecho, (en el exilio, y mientras esperamos, no importa), la articulación de una sociedad civil de forma autónoma, una legislación e instituciones que garanticen la igualdad entre hombres y mujeres y unos ideales

políticos acordes a los valores democráticos del concierto de naciones. (Mohammed Dafa, "Una lectura actualizada")

Thus, revealing and addressing gender-based inequalities in the nation-building discourse is central to Mohamed Dafa's literary work. In critiquing the burden of the nationalist agenda that is placed on the backs of women, Elleke Boehmer writes:

> Whether we look at its iconography, its administrative structures or its policies, the new postcolonial nation is historically a male-constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition. (Boehmer 22)

Evidence from Mohamed Dafa's online articles and works of fiction reveals an agenda to unseat those totems in Saharawi society by skillfully challenging or reconfiguring various female-oriented border figures and umbilical cultural objects that often serve to construct representations of the Saharawi nation.

Mohamed Dafa's opposing position on the official version of Saharawi identity is established in "Carta de cumpleaños," her very first post on *Democracia Saharaui*. The post focuses on internal barriers along gender and class lines that reflect the uneven impact of the conflict and the condition of exile within the society, rather than on the usual geopolitical borderline. For example, Mohamed Dafa compares her birthday, which was an assigned date of birth rather than her actual birthdate, to the many other fundamental experiences that have been imposed on Saharawis: "Añoramos la patria que no tenemos; hemos hecho la historia que no escribimos; nuestra identidad y hasta nuestras vidas, forzadas, artificiales, provisionales, tampoco ya las guiamos" ("Carta de cumpleaños"). However, the "we" in the just-cited assertion may not necessarily refer to the general Saharawi population in the context of the violation of their right to self-determination. Instead, Mohamed Dafa may well be writing on behalf of women, particularly those whose rights, as she often contends, are overshadowed by the national cause. Indeed, writing elsewhere in support of the emerging Saharawi feminist positions on social media, Mohamed Dafa dismisses a central official narrative, in which women are portrayed as empowered members in their society, as a "cárcel dorada de un relato épico y heroico, que ya es historia" ("Sí, existe un feminismo"). She also denounces the failures to protect Saharawi women's rights in areas such as education, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and sexual and reproductive health. Furthermore, contrary to the tendency in contemporary Hispano-Saharawi

writing to extol the virtues of distinctive Saharawi customs and traditions, Mohamed Dafa uses her post about birthdays to reveal how women and female children may be negatively affected by some practices such as the nomadic system of dating whereby remarkable incidents, rather than dates, were used to mark events including births. Thus, in "Carta de cumpleaños," while making seemingly innocuous and even amusing comments about the inconveniences posed by unregistered births and the endless arguments that women would have about the age of their children, Mohamed Dafa introduces the troubling idea that the traditional system of dating left female children vulnerable to early marriage. Additionally, whereas the absence of the notion of birthdays in traditional Saharawi culture is often remarked upon as just another general feature of Saharawi identity (Salem Iselmu 61-62), Mohamed Dafa suggests that birthdays are not universally alien to Saharawis in the present times and that they do exist as a class differentiator. In that context, she recalls that the only two girls in her school who had fixed dates of birth, and who celebrated their birthdays, were "hijas de altos cargos del Frente, con lo cual eran gente culta con capacidad para acordarse y sobre todo darle importancia al tema en cuestión" (Mohamed Dafa, "Carta de cumpleaños"). The exposure of social and gender inequalities in Saharawi society, as well as the resistance to traditional practices that undermine democracy and the rights of Saharawi women, resonate throughout Mohamed Dafa's *Democracia Saharaui*.

In her short story "¿Y si la Tierra fuese redonda?" (from *Democracia Saharaui*), Mohamed Dafa uses the spatial configuration of the story's three characters to illustrate the fundamental paradox of the valorization of Saharawi women in the national identity narrative and their apparent exclusion from actual power in society. The title of the story is drawn from the first-person musings of a young girl, Safia, who invites herself to listen in on her father's explanations of astronomical mysteries from the Qur'an to her brother: "Una noche de esas en las que el cielo se abría encima de nosotros como un libro mágico y mi padre se lo leía a mi hermano pequeño, yo, aprovechándome de su bondad … me arrimé al lado de mi hermano para escuchar." Given that Safia invites herself to the gathering and that her brother, not she, is her father's primary audience, it is reasonable to imagine her on the margins of the gathering. Indeed, Safia's spatial positioning, vis-à-vis her father and brother, is coded as a vocal marginalization through the representation of her attempts to contribute to a discussion that excludes her. While her younger brother boldly comments and asks questions, she could only once manage to timidly question her father's explanation of the solar system: "Papá, mi profesor de geografía nos ha dicho en clase que el Sol no se mueve, que es la Tierra la que gira. ¿Eso es verdad? –pregunto con

timidez" (Mohamed Dafa, "¿Y si la Tierra fuese redonda?"). Safia is on the margins of this small gathering of three in more ways than one. On the one hand, she is on the outer edge of belonging, as can be observed from her muted voice in the story. On the other hand, and paradoxically, she is a border figure in the sense that her body represents that line whose integrity is supposed to align with that of her community. This becomes clear at the end of the story when, in a footnote, she explains the reason behind the many admonitions that she received as a child, from her mother, her aunts and her grandmother, to never lie on her back:

> Pasó mucho tiempo, hasta que, finalmente, logré enterarme de por qué una niña no debe tumbarse ni dormir nunca boca arriba. Los ángeles, esas criaturas que trabajan a las órdenes de Allah, te maldicen mientras estés en esa postura, y porque un espíritu maligno se puede aprovechar y te puede infligir un daño tan grande como es acabar con tu virginidad. (Mohamed Dafa, "¿Y si la Tierra fuese redonda?")

This story in which Safia's body is tethered to Saharawi modesty and decorum recalls the gendered identity-making processes in which women are both "the 'inviolate centre' (of the nation, the region, the community, the family) and [the] 'symbolic border guards', upholding and reaffirming the demarcation between that which they represent and the 'other'" (Abrams and Hunt 193). The added layer of Safia's diminished voice, juxtaposed with her significance as a border figure, signals Mohamed Dafa's unwillingness to simply restate the symbolic formulations of the national boundary lines of Saharawi identity. She transgresses those lines further in the short story "El negocio de Salma. 'Solo para mujeres'" (also from *Democracia Saharaui*).
"El negocio de Salma. 'Solo para mujeres'" can be read as a narrative space of citizenship-making, rather than of nation-building. In that space, the normative border figures, and the female-oriented cultural umbilical objects, such as the idea of *tuiza*, the *jaima* and the *melhfa*, are recoded or appropriated to advance the central character's resistance to the cartographic role assigned to her in the narrative of Saharawi national identity.

"El negocio de Salma. 'Solo para mujeres,'" as the title suggests, is a story about a business owned by the eponymous character. Its setting is the twenty-first-century refugee camps near Tindouf, where the camps, just like many other locations, are connected to the rest of the world by means of the internet, social media, and the movement of people, capital, and merchandise. In this environment in which Salma is trying to make a living in a new economy, her entrepreneurial spirit and her inventiveness should earn her a place in the pantheon of resourceful Saharawi women. However,

unlike her forebears, who built the camps with their bare hands and the clothes on their backs, neither Salma's body nor her actions map seamlessly onto the borderlines of Saharawi identity.

In the first place, the collaboration of women for mutual benefit and for the well-being of the community that is encapsulated in the notion of *tuiza* appears to be untenable when it comes to Salma. Although the idea of *tuiza* is a valued feature of Saharawiness, we find that, in Mohamed Dafa's story, it is not transferable to the partnership of women for income generation. "El negocio de Salma" is Salma's third attempt at running her own business. When her first business venture failed because she refused to trade in harmful cosmetic products, she did not give up. Instead, she went into partnership with another woman to set up a hammam — an Islamic bathhouse that also doubles as a socialization venue for women. However, her second attempt did not succeed either, because the husband of her newly married partner would not allow the latter to work outside the home. For all her inventiveness and resourcefulness, solidarity with other women eludes Salma, since she operates outside the parameters of idealized values and expectations.

Additionally, Salma does not conform to the feminized notions of the Saharawi homeland. She is neither a mother nor a wife, nor does she exude the beauty that is associated with Tiris, the figurative lover of many male writers. She dropped out of school, got married, promptly got divorced, and had no children. As such, she is not one of the symbols of "maternal self-sacrifice or the nation's fierce, 'virginal' pride" (Boehmer 28-29). In other words, her portrayal lies outside the parameters of "[t]he familiar nationalist discourse that employs good/moral/respectable women and women's bodies as signifier for the nation" (Finden 47). Rather, she is what would be considered "an unknown subversive quantity and a threat" (Boehmer 29). Therefore, she is viewed in her community as an exotic force that must be contained: "Su físico no deja a nadie indiferente. Todos encuentran en ella algún rasgo de animal salvaje. La llaman jirafa por su altura y su cuello infinito; pantera negra por su piel, aunque en realidad es de color canela; o gacela por sus enormes ojos" (Mohamed Dafa, "El negocio de Salma"). Furthermore, her body does not fit the ideal that, according to Mohamed Dafa elsewhere in her writings, some women hope to achieve in order to feel valued.[3] The degree to which she defies the norms of beauty is evident in the fact that she refused to sell the kinds of cosmetics that women would use to achieve their society's version of those norms. In further defiance of the expectations regarding women's body image, Salma rejects the practice of women covering their arms and faces to avoid getting dark. Under these circumstances, her position as a border figure shifts from being

aligned with the boundaries between the nation and its threatening others. It is instead aligned with an internal demarcation between assertions of nationhood and citizenship claims.

The decoupling of Salma's body, and the bodies of Saharawi women in general, from feminized imaginations of the nation is further achieved via the decentralization of the timeless image of the *jaima* and by updating the representation of the refugee space. Salma's business turns out to be a clandestine film screening business, supposedly for a female clientele that she runs with a business partner from her home. On the surface, the latter is similar to those feminized environments, such as the places in which women gather for communal work, poetry recitals, and the traditional tea ceremony, that reinforce the idea that women have a central role in their society. In this instance, however, Salma's home is not the proverbial *jaima.* It is instead "una casa de adobe y cemento con distintos compartimentos, toda cubierta, con una puerta única de entrada orientada al sur" (Mohamed Dafa, "El negocio de Salma"). Although the narrator attributes Salma's choice of home to youthful preferences ("Como hacen muchas jóvenes ha prescindido de la jaima"), there is a symbolic significance to the fact that she does not live in a *jaima*. The *jaima*, which is traditionally built collaboratively by women, is "an object gendered female in poetic discourses … and a customary domain of female power" (Solana 370). As such, it is often underscored in the nationalistic discourse as a metaphor for the nation, over which women preside within the norms. Its replacement with a non-traditional home over which Salma presides on her own terms suggests a reconfiguration of the symbolic national space.

Furthermore, the replacement of the image of the *jaima* with the "modern" adobe and cement construction also suggests an updating of the traditional socio-spatial representation of the Saharawi nation. The increasing replacement of *jaimas* in the refugee camps with more permanent constructions, built on a growing cash economy, reflects the ongoing transformation of the former from desolate camps into what refugee critics describe as "proto-urban" spaces (Rygiel 808) or "camps-cities" (Agier 171). Like many other cities, they too are spaces in which transnational movements of people, goods, and information are contributing to the creation of a diverse socio-economic terrain. Consequently, the Saharawi refugee camps, which now embody some form of infrastructural permanence, albeit precarious, also reflect elements of social differentiation and cultural transformation, such as significant socio-economic inequalities among the refugees (Herz 382), increasing replacement of women by men in income-generating activities (Trasosmontes 291), and hybrid identities (Almenara Niebla and Sánchez 9).

Such transformations generate challenges to social norms and traditions on the one hand and, on the other, lead to a heightened sense of a need to reinforce the ideas of national belonging. In that context, it is noteworthy that the discourse of harmonious gender relations, another hallmark of normative Saharawi identity, is undercut in "El negocio de Salma" by the fact that Salma defies social expectations, and she is in turn routinely harassed by "guardianes de la moral," who monitor adherence to traditional values. In contrast to the traditional *jaima* where a homogenous homeland is perpetually relived, Salma's home, where she also runs a business that caters to consumers of popular foreign films, is a space in which individuals maintain oppositional relationships with traditions, authority, and expectations.

The ultimate untethering of Saharawi women and their bodies from the national boundaries occurs through Salma's appropriation of the *melhfa* to enable both men and women to escape the confines of Saharawi normativity. Although Salma advertises her business as catering exclusively to women, the attendees at the film screenings include men. She ingeniously takes advantage of the *melhfa*, which wraps around the body and covers the head, to enable the men to attend, by dressing up as women. Indeed, her partner, who is described as "su socia, la mujer gigante que no sale del cuarto pequeño" and who projects the films turns out to be "Ahmed, el prometido de Salma y su socio en el negocio" (Mohamed Dafa, "El negocio de Salma"). Salma's defiant stance is further accentuated by the irony that the *melhfa*-clad male projectionist, screening *foreign* films in her home, was trained at the Escuela Nacional de Cine Abidin Kaid Saleh, the national film school at the refugee camps, where students typically produce *nationalistic* films.

The instrumentalization of cross-dressing in the above manner in Mohamed Dafa's story could be read as a response to "sumptuary panic," that is, "boundary panic over clothing [which] erupts most intensely during periods of social turbulence" (McClintock 174). Indeed, social commentary by Mohamed Dafa and other writers[4] would suggest that boundary panic over when and how women's bodies should be covered is on the rise in Saharawi refugee camps, and communities abroad, on par with the increasing assertions of difference and personal autonomy by women. The intensification of transnationalism and the new identities and sociopolitical claims that it has brought in its wake, the increased presence of men in the camps following the 1991 ceasefire as well as the need felt by some to demarcate gender roles more sharply, not to mention the impact of religious tensions in the camps,[5] are all contributing factors to women's sartorial choices becoming significant for marking out national boundaries and the

policing of those boundaries. The idea that women are "visible and above all legible distinctions" (McClintock 174) of the integrity of the trinity of womanhood, territory and nation has become even more significant under those circumstances. In putting women's clothing on male bodies to achieve her entrepreneurial goals, Salma succeeds in erasing the script of nationhood from Saharawi women and their bodies. Salma's subversive manipulation of the sartorial border figure and umbilical object, the *melhfa*, reveals the fabricated and ambiguous nature of the very boundaries that the traditional outfit is supposed to demarcate. In this regard, Salma, instigator of cross-dressing, transforms the hallowed clothing of Saharawi women into a powerful iconoclastic tool.

The monolithic ethos of nation-building, exemplified in representations of "woman-as-nation" (Boehmer 23), comes under scrutiny in Mohamed Dafa's writing. In this context, she disrupts the gendered borderlines that tend to be reproduced in much of contemporary Hispano-Saharawi literature and throws a spotlight on gender-based social issues, which generally remain invisible in the very visible, women-centred national demarcation lines. Furthermore, her reappropriation of bordering tropes transforms her writing into a significant "temporal border" (Schimanski, "Crossing and Reading" 55-56). Her work could be seen as marking a boundary between what has been identified as two central stages of identity construction in the forty-nine years of Saharawis' exile and refugeehood: "el primero, asociado al exilio y al proyecto nacional; el segundo, claramente atravesado por los procesos de movilidad y el impacto de las nuevas tecnologías, donde emergen nuevas y complejas subjetividades" (Almenara Niebla and Ascanio Sánchez 3). In the first, representations of women and their bodies are used as boundary-making tools. In the latter, in which Mohamed Dafa's characters operate, camp-city dynamics reveal women with differentiated identities whose oppositional claims are their tools for inserting themselves as citizens into an ambiguous national space.

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NOTES

1 A selection of the images from the #Ns-Sh campaign can be found at *Después del Futuro*. http://www.afterthefuture.care/desmaquillando-tabues.html.

2 See, for example, the post "¿Por qué necesito ser feminista?" by Maryam Abbas at https://amnatthawra.wordpress.com/2019/03/09/opinion-por-que-necesito-ser-feminista/.

3 See, for example, "En busca del ideal de belleza, una trampa mortal" (*Democracia Saharaui*), in which Mohamed Dafa writes about the harmful effects of some of the products used by women in the refugee camps to attain a desired weight or skin tone.

4 See "Con y sin melhfa," in which Mohamed Dafa responds to the harsh criticism that she faced on social media for not wearing a *melhfa* to present at a conference.

5 For more information on these and related social, cultural, and economic transformations in the Saharawi refugee camps, see Almenara Niebla and Ascanio Sánchez (18-21), López Belloso and Mendia Azkue (172), Trasosmontes (292), and Mohamed Dafa ("¿Existe un feminismo saharaui?" and "Las piedras son de Allah").

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