
Madre de leche y miel

TITLE: Madre de leche y miel [A mother who gives milk and honey]

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Within a community of women, first real and then imagined, Fatima builds this story of motherhood, traditions, and migration. At the beginning of the novel, Fatima lives surrounded by women in Rif, and her daily life is almost exclusively feminine: men are separate from them, at different levels, due to Muslim religious practices and customs that the narrator takes the time to explain to her readers. Once she begins her journey outside of their town, the women in her family become her addressees: Fatima narrates her misadventures and challenges to them, as if they were a comforting company during the hardships she has to endure.

Taking a traditional route, from Morocco to Catalonia, this trip of a mother and her daughter results iconic for a popular migration trend (Catalonia is the region with the biggest Moroccan population in Spain). Although in that sense traditional, this novel focuses on the personal episodes Fatima, a mother, faces, sometimes as a protagonist, sometimes as a witness, discovering singularities from a human perspective that transcends mere statistics. Alternating narrations in the third person (past) and the first person (present), *Madre de leche y miel* is a deeply human tale of contemporary migration and processes of adaptation to new cultures. While the narration moves forward following Fatima and her daughter's integration process, many of her memories appear as flashbacks to illustrate her understanding of what being a woman is, and how she has learned those lessons since she was a child. The woman's perspective also adds an angle of criticism to well-engrained privileges for men, as well as micro and macro injustices in both cultures.

Madre de leche y miel is divided in two parts of 18 chapters each. The first part, "La antigüedad de una mujer," begins with Fatima's talking to her sisters, presenting the novel as an answer to their requests of telling her story, and describing their shared life at home, both the last days before her departure and memories from her own childhood, and including a terrible episode of domestic violence among her neighbors. Besides the sisters, other characters are the mother and the grandmother, as well as some close neighbors, and then Fatima's husband's family. Men also appear, and when they do is to exhibit open violence, harassment, or contrasts between the genders (such as when only the brother receives a private bedroom, given that girls will have one of their own at their husbands' homes when they marry).

The story in the third person narrates Fatima's childhood through a series of emotionally intense episodes: the death of one of her sisters and the subsequent guilt that falls upon her mother (that implies the risk of being kicked out of the husband's home, or being "returned"), and an exchange with a male teacher who "ruined" her in a manner that is not explicitly told but is surrounded by her own fears and prejudices. It also includes the negotiations about her wedding when she is 14 years old, and how she lives her courtship, engagement, and preparation for her wedding as a painful expulsion from her family's home. The second part, "La antigüedad de una madre," begins with her three day wedding and the adaptation period to her husband's house and family, where other women only offer her rivalry and jealousy. Her husband abandons her and she discovers (and cancels) a sorcery job among her things; by destroying it, she thinks she brings Mohammed, her husband, back. When he briefly returns, he tells her he cannot take her with him and leaves again, leaving her pregnant. After Sara is born, the narration focuses on her first years of life, until her interest in the Quran takes her to the mosque, where she challenges the rules strictly followed at her home as she is the only girl to be able to learn. After feeling like beggars at her estranged husband's home, Fatima and Sara return to her father's house, where she only asks for her utensils to make bread.

In alternate chapters with this first narrative line, the first person begins the story where the third left it. Fatima describes her departure from home, and her journey through Melilla, and by bus to Catalonia, where strangers helped her although she did not speak Spanish. All she had was an address, but no one opens when they arrive, so they sleep under a bridge. After finding the place, the man who was supposed to receive them did not want

them there—we then find out it was her husband and her daughter’s father, who remarried with a “Christian” and has a younger daughter. The one who lives now in his place gives them food and helps them find a place to live. After some part-time jobs as a maid, a woman helps her find a job in a factory that pays better. Later on, she meets Latifa, a good friend who shares her values, and her husband. Both help her and Sara to have a quiet and good life, until one of her sisters-in-law arrives in town to make her life difficult with mean intended gossips. She obtains legal status and, after a harassment scene with a man in power, she leaves and takes different jobs. She begins communicating with her family at home (first recording tapes and then by phone). Sara flourishes at school and socially, something very problematic for Fatima and her traditional and religious views. She then decides to travel home with Sara, for her to recover her roots and connection with traditions and family. During that trip, Fatima procures a husband for Sara, the son of a close friend of the family.

Finally, the novel includes a “recorded” letter from Fatima to her daughter, Sara, that consists of a series of messages that Fatima leaves for Sara’s. Through them, we find out that Sara has married the husband her mother had chosen for her, suffers deeply in a very unhappy marriage with a man who behaves like a child, and abandons them all after giving birth to her son. Fatima discovers she has fled to Barcelona, unsuccessfully tries to find her, and keeps leaving message after message, where she repents from her actions, to no avail. The last section of the book is a glossary with key terms and expressions in the Amazigh language from the Rif used throughout the novel (375-80).

Najat El Hachmi creates a vivid picture of a human life in *Madre de leche y miel*, in pages full of material details that make the reading very relatable, through an almost colloquial style. The structure of the novel (its alternation between Fatima’s present in a Catalan small town and her past at home) has a lively effect, showing how her past is constantly part of her present, and giving the character a well-rounded and engaging personality. Additionally, the feminist message—although never explicitly formulated as such—permeates all descriptions of unfair scenes, and inequalities both in her home and hosting country, as a promising invitation to reflect on womanhood across cultures.

This book could be part of a series of popular books on Muslim characters’ life stories, customs and traditions, such as the best seller *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and the young adult novel *Written in the Stars* by Aisha Saeed (about a Pakistani American girl who is forced into a marriage against her will). Although this novel does not have a powerful plot (with intrigue or an enthralling storyline), its attraction resides in detailed human landscapes and detailed situations and feelings.

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