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## FROM SNOW WHITE TO SHREISHER DAHBU: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN SAHARAWI STORYTELLING

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### Resumen

Los campamentos de refugiados saharauis de Tinduf, Argelia, gobernados por el frente de liberación saharauí, el Polisario, se formaron en 1975 cuando la invasión marroquí y mauritana de su tierra forzó los saharauis a dejar la Sahara Occidental. Las mujeres juegan un papel clave en la gestión de estos campamentos, y muchos periodistas, intelectuales y miembros del público internacionales han notado el avance en la emancipación de mujeres, en un contraste marcado a las imágenes estereotípicas occidentales de las mujeres árabes y islámicas como pasivas, sumisas y muy oprimidas. Por cierto, las mujeres, y la liberación y igualdad de género que supuestamente disfrutaban, son un enfoque común en los discursos del Polisario ¿Pero qué imágenes de mujeres se presentan en la cultura tradicional saharauí? Explorando representaciones de género en cuentos tradicionales saharauis – y comparando y contrastándolos con cuentos de hadas europeos para iluminar más intensamente las construcciones de género propias del Sahara - intento responder a esta pregunta.

**Palabras Claves:** Sahara Occidental, género, cuentos de hadas, Polisario.

**Abstract**

The Saharawi refugee camps of Tindouf, Algeria, governed by the Saharawi liberation front the Polisario, were formed in 1975 when the Saharawis were forced to leave their country, the Western Sahara (previously a Spanish colony), due to the invasion of Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. Women play a key role in the running of these camps, and many international journalists, intellectuals and members of the public have commented on the advancement in the emancipation of women, in sharp contrast to the stereotypical Western image of Arab and Islamic women as passive, submissive and heavily oppressed. Indeed women, and the supposed liberation and gender equality that they enjoy, are a common focus in Polisario discourse. Yet what images of women are presented in traditional Saharawi culture? By exploring representations of gender in traditional Saharawi stories – and comparing and contrasting them with European fairytales in order to more brightly illuminate the constructions of gender particular to the Sahara - I attempt to address this question.

**Key Words:** Western Sahara, gender, fairytales, Polisario.



*Hablar del cuento saharawi es hablar del pueblo saharawi, de sus tradiciones y de su historia, de sus vivencias y sus perspectivas.*  
(Haidar, 2007: 24)

*The child who is fed tales such as Snow White is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple.* (Daly, 1987: 44)

The influence of literature on the formation of social imaginaries and identities is remarkable. Many societies rely on narrative mode for children's socialisation into a specific cultural reality as the fairy tale is "to this day the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind." (Wanning Harries, 2003: 10). As Alexandra Georakopoulou and Dionysis Goutsos point out, "[t]he truth established in a story appears to have a stronger cognitive effect on people than the truth established through rationality and informative texts." (Georakopoulou and Goutsos, 1997: 41)

In the mystical landscape of the Western Sahara, with its awe-inspiring mountains and dunes, green oases, moon-like craterous rocky plains and abundant

dry and golden *wadis*<sup>1</sup>, where “en la sombra de cada acacia ... en cada pozo ... hay miles de historias”<sup>2</sup> to be discovered, this cultural education transmitted through the enthralling adventures depicted in stories, myths and legends was traditionally carried out in the familiar and cozy atmosphere of the grandmother’s *jaima*. “Siempre los mayores, los abuelos, te cuentan los cuentos. Y te meten en lo que es lo de antes.”<sup>3</sup> When the men had returned from a long day grazing the camels, the sun resting under the blanket of the night, the water and firewood fetched, and the dinner slowly stewing on the stove, the children would gather around the storyteller with anticipation and “sólo escuchan, miran y escuchan. Y todo lo que han escuchado lo retienen en la mente ... todo esto ... retiene un niño del desierto desde pequeño hasta mayor.”<sup>4</sup> Amongst the many moral and social messages that the listener receives and retains through the events of the (pedagogical) story and the antics of the characters are the lessons of gender. (Haase 2004:3, Haase, 2004: xii, Bottigheimer, 2004:37, Wanning Harries, 2004:100, Odber de Baubeta 2004: 132, Preston, 2004:203, Zipes, 1986:vii, Zipes, 1986:2, Lieberman, 1986:185) Whilst imprinting gender images on our brains, such stories simultaneously reflect established social norms about traditional femininity and masculinity. Indeed, Lee Haring asserts that folk tales are “the finest evidence for understanding the fashioning and altering of social identities and the social practices that make possible the ways in which cultures describe gender” (Haring, 2004: 170).

In this paper I will explore how gender is constructed in traditional Saharawi stories as well as in the fairytales of my own European cultural heritage. The juxtaposition of the two traditions will help to illuminate and define the contours of the gender images presented. But I am not the first to link these two traditions. In fact, both traditions are related and share many characters, plots and narrative strategies. In a short story about a visit by Don Quixote to a Saharawi *frig*<sup>5</sup>, Mohamed Salem Abdelfatah (Ebnu) lists famous literary characters, both European and Saharawi,

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<sup>1</sup> Rivers.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Bahia Mahmud Awah, Saharawi poet, journalist and academic, Madrid, 7 February 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Zeina Mohamed Salem, Granada, 28 August 2008.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Group of tents.

who had passed by the camp on other occasions; “ya habían pasado Cenicienta, Shertat, Blancanieves, Peter Pan, Caperucita Roja y Shreiser Dahbú”. (Abdelfatah, forthcoming: 59). Like Saharawi stories, fairytales were originally passed on by word of mouth (they only began to be written down from the seventeenth century onwards) and were initially for all age groups, not just children. (Cosslett, 1996:82) They have much influence over modern gender constructs as they constitute the voice of the dominant ideology in what Jack Zipes calls “the modern culture industry”, (Zipes quoted in Cosslett, 1996: 83) in which the masculine and feminine roles idealised in the fairytales are reemployed in children’s cartoons and films, yet also for adults, above all in women’s popular literature. For example, Karen E. Rowe notes that the stories published in many women’s magazines tend to continue to glamorise the heroine’s traditional yearning for love yet degrade it to sexual titillation, citing as a case in point the amusingly titled story *He Brought My Body to Peaks of Ecstasy on His Water-Bed... Yet I Knew I Had to Leave Him for Another Lover*. (Rowe, 1986:209)

Given that the stories analysed here all come originally from oral traditions, there are probably countless versions of each, which potentially construct gender in many different ways; versions that, in addition, have varied over time and are still evolving in different directions, including some recent feminist attempts to reinterpret such stories empowering the principal female characters.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore necessary to make explicit which versions I am using in this paper. Of the European fairytales, I refer to the mass-consumed versions popularized by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Walt Disney, which are all very similar and by far the most well known.<sup>7</sup> As for the Saharawi stories, the versions I analyse here are those presented by Larosi Haidar in his book *Cuentos saharauis: Traducción y aproximación a los cuentos de animales*, by Fernando Pinto Cebrián and Antonio Jiménez Trigueros in their work *Bajo la Jaima: Cuentos Populares del Sáhara*,<sup>8</sup> and in the case of *Shreisher*

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<sup>6</sup> For example see Catherine Storr, *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf*, London, 1967, Jay Williams, *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales*, London, 1979, and Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, London, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> According to Wanning Harries, in the 1960s the French conteuses wrote fairytales that questioned gender norms, but unfortunately their stories and histories have long since fallen by the wayside. See Wanning Harries, “Introduction: Once, Not Long Ago”, 3-18.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the “authors” quote the stories collected as coming from “Trab el-Bidán”, which includes most of Mauritania and smaller parts of Mali and Algeria, as well as the entire Western Sahara.

*Dahbu*, the version quoted by Ana Tortajada in her book *Hijas de las Nubes*, selected because these are the only written and published versions available at the time of writing. Therefore, a crucial difference is that while the European fairytales have been 'encoded', and thus their possible flux of different meanings arrested, the Saharawi stories are still mainly oral. It could be assumed that there is more room for variation in the Saharawi stories, while in the Western context the possible variations and re-interpretations are more "limited" by the horizon of possibilities opened by the written hegemonic versions, which act as the surface of inscription even for the most radical feminist reinterpretations. Taking this into account, firstly, I will compare how gendered sexuality is constructed in the European and Saharawi stories as I see it as an area where particularly salient double standards tend to exist with respect to gender. Secondly, I look at how the agency of the female and male protagonists of the tales are imagined, evaluating how active or passive they are. Thirdly, I analyse how maternity is constructed and what attitudes exist within the stories towards mother figures. Finally, I conclude by exploring ways of re-conceptualising such images of the masculine and the feminine.

Once upon time, a story about a man called Adam and a woman called Eve was popularised internationally by three major religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The constructions of gender and sexuality that it propagated were reproduced in the minds and customs of peoples all over the world "happily" ever after. According to the myth, Eve manipulates naive Adam with her elusive sexual powers and entices him to be her accomplice in the picking of the apple from the forbidden tree against the orders of God, and thus brings about the eternal downfall and misfortune of humankind. As Nawal El Saadawi points out, this reflects the Arabic concept of *fitna*. *Fitna* is Arabic for women's overpowering seductiveness, which combines attraction and mischievousness. According to Islamic ethos, *fitna* can have disastrous consequences, causing uprising, conspiracy and anarchy that endanger and subvert the existing order of things, and the bringing about of "moral and social turmoil". (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994:56) As El Saadawi explains,

From this [idea of *fitna*] arose the conception that life could only follow its normal, steady and uninterrupted course and society could only avoid any potential menace in its stability and structure, or any disruption of the social order, if men continued to satisfy the sexual needs of their women, kept them happy, and protected their honour. If this was not ensured a *fitna* could easily be let loose, since the honour

of women would be in doubt, and as a result uneasiness and trouble could erupt at any moment. The virtue of women had to be ensured if peace was to reign among men...<sup>9</sup> (El Saadawi, 1980:136)

This conception of women's sexuality and the honour intrinsically associated with it is repeated in many cultural images of gender today, from the black-widow-spider femme fatales that are the downfall of men in Hollywood films, to fairytale heroines such as the honourable Snow White whose maidenhood is made apparent in the colour of her name.<sup>10</sup> This paradigm is also a characteristic of some Saharawi traditions.

All the characters that appear in the stories translated by Haidar in his work, and some in the work of Pinto and Jiménez, are animals with human characteristics. In Haidar's opinion, the female animals are generally representative of Saharawi women, whilst the male animals symbolise traits associated with Saharawi men.<sup>11</sup> The (female) Hare is the animal that has the most in common with Eve, and her namelessness is perhaps a technique employed to draw attention to her symbolic feminine status.<sup>12</sup> Pinto and Jiménez significantly state that "como las mujeres, [la liebre] habla mucho y tiene gran capacidad de engaño". (Pinto Cebrián et. al., 2004: xi) In a story translated by Haidar, she uses her beauty to charm the (male) hyena into marrying her, and then manipulates him for her own ends. Haidar explains,

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<sup>9</sup> *Fitna* is also used historically to refer to upheavals and civil war within the Islamic world. For more on this use of the term see for example G.H.A Juynboll, "The Date of the Great Fitna", *Arabica*, 20:2, 1973, 142-159. For more on the concept of *fitna* and the consequent policing of women's sexuality, see also Nayereh Tohidi, "Modernity, Islamization and Women in Iraq", *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, (Valentine Moghadam ed.), London, 1994, pp.119 and 139, Valentine N. Moghadam, "Nationalist Agendas and Women's Rights", *Feminist Nationalism*, (Lois A. West ed.), London, 1997, p.78 and Cherifati-Merabtine, "Algeria at a Crossroads...", p.56.

<sup>10</sup> Typical femme fatales in Hollywood would be the female "baddies" in Bond films. For more on the "femme fatale" paradigm see Peter W. Evans, "The Dame in the Kimono: *Amantes*, Spanish *Noir* and the *Femme Fatale*", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 76:1, 1 January 1999, 93-100, Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Studies and Psychoanalysis*, New York, 1991, and Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*, London, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Larosi Haidar, Saharawi writer and academic, Granada University, 26 November 2007.

<sup>12</sup> See Karen Hodder, "The Lady of Shalott in Art and Literature", *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, (Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall eds.), London, 1989, p.75 for more on namelessness used as a technique to convey the iconography of womanhood.



the hyena “representa al hombre inocente y bonachón que actúa por instinto, y la liebre... simboliza a la calculadora y maquinadora mujer”. (Haidar, 2007: 76) It appears that Sidati Essalami - the man who originally collected the stories used by Haidar in the 1960s and 70s - had quoted a poem along with the story of the Hare,

No albergues esperanzas en una hembra  
toda una vida  
pues aunque lo jure por lo más sagrado  
te mentirá un día  
No albergues esperanzas en una hembra  
toda una vida  
pues es como la temible serpiente  
cuando más grandes sus colmillos  
más ha de ser temida.  
Seduca con dulces palabras  
más cuando arremete  
es lo peor para la vida (Essalami quoted in Haidar, 2007: 74)

The female uses her beauty to manipulate and deceive men, whose brains are presumably numbed by the presence of an attractive woman. The poem links women’s sexuality (“seduce con dulces palabras”) with danger (“colmillos”, “ha de ser temida”, “arremete”) and betrayal (“es como la temible serpiente”). Yet nothing is said about men’s sexuality, only “la hembra” is referred to, implying that males are unable to “employ” their sexuality to manipulate or deceive women and are merely helpless beasts that, like Adam, are natural victims to female temptation. If this poem and the symbol of the Hare are in one way or another a reflection of wider attitudes in the Western Sahara towards gendered sexualities, it could be assumed that such perceptions are reinforcing a cultural norm in society similar to *fitna*, which aims to “control” women’s sexuality in a way that men’s isn’t for the sake of peace and order in society. As Pablo San Martín explains,

En el Sahara Occidental, la sexualidad del hombre es normalmente considerada menos problemática que la de la mujer, más sencilla, básica y ... directa. En cierta manera, aunque esto es una generalización y como toda generalización tiene que ser matizada...pero parece que se asume que un hombre siempre que pueda va a querer tener sexo con una mujer, es como si se considerase que el hombre es débil y que no se puede controlar. Si un hombre tiene la oportunidad de acostarse con una chica...en general (¡pero muy en general!) ... no va a decir que no. No se supone que el hombre se tiene que ‘controlar’...al contrario, se asume que el hombre va a

tener sexo siempre que pueda y que eso es natural. Entonces, en la medida en que la sexualidad del hombre es, en ese sentido, más lineal, ... es la sexualidad de la mujer la que aparece popularmente como más compleja y retorcida, en cierta manera: la mujer puede 'jugar' con la sexualidad – y con su sensualidad – para flirtear con el hombre... manejarlo, y hacer que pierda el control ... y el hombre, si puede, siempre se va a 'aprovechar' de ella ... o mejor dicho nunca va a poder resistir los encantos de una mujer, que es distinto. Es decir, que si por una parte la mujer aparece como más débil en muchos aspectos, en otros aparece como sexualmente más problemática y peligrosa. En ese sentido, en situaciones conflictivas el hombre puede ser visto como la víctima a la que las mujeres hacen perder la cabeza con su belleza y sus flirteos, y las mujeres como las desencadenantes de dichos conflictos (matrimoniales, de honor en las familias ... como los embarazos antes del matrimonio ...) porque en sus manos está el mantenerse limpias y alejadas de los hombres y el no fomentar situaciones en las que un hombre, ya se sabe, nunca va a poder decir que no ... sino todo lo contrario...<sup>13</sup>

The reasons for marriage highlighted by the stories reinforce this idea of male vulnerability in the face of female sexuality. In all the stories collected by Pinto Cebrián and Jiménez Trigueros concerning marriage, the bride's astonishing good looks are the main reason for the husband's proposal, illustrating his ignorant and irrational behaviour in the face of a sexually attractive woman. On the other hand, the women select their partners on the basis of personality, whether due to the husband's good sense of humour, ability to provide for the bride, or his loyalty, generosity or good-nature, which suggests that women are not privy to the same sexual "weaknesses" as men are perceived to be. Of course, the contradiction here is that whilst the stories on the whole require women to be beautiful, which suggests sexual charisma, they simultaneously encourage the condemnation and severe punishment of women who express their sexuality, as I further argue below.

*Shreiser Dabbú* – a very popular Saharawi story about the adventures of a young Saharawi girl – is an illustration of how women's sexuality is perceived to be something negative and therefore worthy of control. In the tale, Shreiser is tricked into eating a snake's egg which subsequently hatches, causing her abdomen to swell. Believing that she is with child, her elder brothers bury her alive as punishment for the dishonour brought upon their family by her apparent pregnancy. (Tortajada, 2004:165) Although this type of murderous "honour" crime is nowadays unknown

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<sup>13</sup> Personal conversation with Pablo San Martin, Leeds, 21 May 2008.

in Saharawi society and would be intolerable, this story nevertheless promotes the idea that the loss of virginity of a woman outside of marriage is unacceptable to society. Furthermore, the stories collected by Pinto and Jiménez illustrate additional examples of the strict controls placed exclusively on women's sexuality. For example, the character of Deilul is – according to Pinto and Jiménez – widely considered by storytellers and their audiences as “brillante pues sabía cómo controlar el comportamiento de sus hijas sin recurrir a la violencia, método que era comúnmente empleado por otros jefes de familia.” (Pinto Cebrián et. al., 2004: ix) This illustrates how violence was used by the (male) heads of families against women to punish or prevent breaches of the “honour” codes of the household or community.

Other stories teach the listener that women should accept and be grateful for such policing by their families. Firstly, in a story named “El Sacrificio”, a woman who “siempre permanecía bajo la severa vigilancia de sus padres” (Pinto Cebrián et. al., 2004: 58) is kidnapped by robbers one day. When a friend of the family comes to save her, she helps her kidnapper instead of her “saviour”, who nevertheless manages to “rescue” her. When the latter asks the woman why she acted in the way she did, she explains to him, “ya estaba harta de la existencia que llevaba con mis padres. Y tú viniste para devolverme al sufrimiento cotidiano.” (Pinto Cebrián et. al., 2004: 59) The story ends with the downfall of the woman – a clear message to the listener not to follow her example of trying to escape to freedom. The story “Deilul y sus hijas” shares the same moral, teaching the listener how to deal with the “hugely urgent problem” of having daughters who think about men,

Deilul se encontró cierto día con un problema que requería ser tratado con la mayor urgencia posible. Sus hijas estaban pensando en hombres.

Después de efectuar un viaje fuera del poblado, trajo oro y otros artículos como regalo para ellas, pero también un saco lleno de arena.

El oro quedó a la vista mientras que el saco lo dejó cuidadosamente cerrado. Acto seguido les demandó elegir entre el oro o el saco, y las hijas prefirieron el saco cerrado pues pensaron que contenía algo más precioso que el oro.

Para su sorpresa el saco estaba lleno de arena.

Deilul les dijo entonces: Queridas hijas, como veis, todo cuanto está escondido resulta más deseable que lo que todo el mundo puede ver. Así es que si la mujer se guarda y permanece en casa, será amada y realizará sus ambiciones. (Pinto Cebrián et. al., 2004: 110)

Therefore, if taken to exemplify common constructions of gender and sexuality in Saharawi society, the stories of “Deilul y sus hijas”, “El Sacrificio”, the Hare and Shreisher Dahbu imply that there are stark double standards for women and men. Whereas men’s sexuality is not identified as a problematic issue at all, the stories imply that women are *justifiably* entangled in an immense web of intense policing and oppression of their sexuality, heavy restrictions on their movement, marginalisation and domestic violence. This is heavily linked to the concept of honour as articulated in many Arabic and/or Islamic societies (and also to varying extents in numerous other - for example Christian - societies). As many researchers note, women and their virtue are the embodiment or carriers of the honour of their family, and through them, that of the whole community. (Mojab, 2004:108–133, Rae Bennett, 2005, Moghadam, 1997:75-100, Berger Gluck, 1997:101-129, Mernissi, 2003, El Saadawi, 1980 and El Saadawi, 1997). Although, as El Saadawi describes, this tradition comes from the pre-Islamic institution of patriarchy - founded in order to control women’s sexuality for economic reasons so that fathers could identify who their children were and pass on their property accordingly - Fatima Mernissi illustrates in her work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, how Islamic teachings have continued to propagate and further entrench this practice (Mernissi, 2003)<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps the most shocking construction of gendered sexuality in a folk tale is that of the European tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, which is commonly assessed as a parable of rape. The male figure of the rugged, brutish wolf lurks in the shadows of the forest lecherously contemplating sweet Red Riding Hood, thinking to himself “What a tender young creature! What a nice plump mouthful”<sup>15</sup> then waits for her in the Grandmother’s bed, eager to consume her. In the same way that women are often described as “tasty” or “sweet”, the eating metaphors here are signifiers of sexual attractiveness, whilst the selection of a bed as the site where Red Riding Hood is devoured further highlights the connotations of rape. The Perrault, Grimm and even the Disney version of this fairytale imply that, in many respects, Red Riding Hood’s fate is her own doing.<sup>16</sup> She had been warned by her mother not to talk to strangers and

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this is also true of other religious teachings, not just Islam.

<sup>15</sup> The Grimm Brothers, *Little Red Cap*, <http://www.authorama.com/grimms-fairy-tales-22.html>

<sup>16</sup> See The Grimm Brothers, *Little Red Cap*, Walt Disney, *Little Red Riding Hood*, USA, 1922, and Charles Perrault, “Little Red Riding Hood”, *Perrault’s Fairy Tales*, <http://www.angelfire.com/nb/classillus/images/perrault/perra.html>.

yet she tells the wolf exactly where she is going, “and was not at all afraid of him.”<sup>17</sup> The narrative discourse implicitly suggests that this is because she subconsciously wants to be ravished by the wolf. Although she is under strict instructions from her mother not to leave the path, she is easily persuaded by the wolf to relax and enjoy “how sweetly the little birds are singing” and other pleasures of nature, and so,

she (runs) from the path into the wood to look for flowers. And whenever she ...pick(s) one, she fancie(s) that she (sees) a still prettier one farther on, and (runs) after it, and so (gets) deeper and deeper into the wood.<sup>18</sup>

This implicitly dangerous venture into the natural world can be read as a metaphor of Red Riding Hood’s “deflowerment” or fall into the temptation of the “birds and the bees”. As Jack Zipes argues, “Little Red Riding is not really sent into the woods to visit grandma but to meet the wolf and to explore her own sexual cravings and social rules of conduct...in male terms, ‘she asks to be raped.’” (Zipes, 1986: 239)<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Susan Brownmiller argues that *Little Red Riding Hood* obscures the true nature of rape by implying that women, in one way or another, *want* it and that they are willing participants in their own defeat.<sup>20</sup>

Focusing on the stories analysed above, it seems that whenever women take a bite from the apple of sexuality the consequences are always potentially fatal and hence their sexuality has to be ‘controlled’ and limited. The Saharawi tales reflect the European cultural pattern of creating sexual double standards for women and men. Whilst women’s desire must be controlled for the sake of society, men are relatively free. *Little Red Riding Hood* goes one step further and constructs an abhorrent picture of gendered sexuality which is surely offensive to both women and men. It implies that women subconsciously want to be raped, whilst men are naturally and innocently inclined to do so when “seduced” by women – the guilty party -

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<sup>17</sup> The Grimm Brothers, *Little Red Cap*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> See also Jack Zipes, “Epilogue: Reviewing and Re-framing Little Red Riding Hood”, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, (Jack Zipes ed.); New York, Routledge, 1993, 343-383, Zipes, “Preface”, xi-xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Brownmiller quoted in Zipes, “A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood’s Trials and Tribulations”, p. 231.

who are “asking for it”. As Ruth B. Bottigheimer argues, the suffering of women in these stories has been “justified from pulpit and podium as the just consequence of Eve’s folly.” (Bottigheimer, 2004:50) Both the Saharawi and the European tales are similar in that they create rigid ideals for women’s sexual conduct that follow this tradition. However, if we focus on the symbolic function of femininity and masculinity in gender arenas other than sexuality, the Saharawi and European stories differ considerably.

Two of the most famous Western fairytales, *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, reveal rigidly stereotyped gender constructions. (Cosslett, 1996:81-90 and Gilbert et.al., 1986:201-208). According to Tess Cosslett, the stories assume that beauty is the most valued characteristic for women, illustrated symbolically by the “beauty contest” between Snow White and her stepmother, and between Cinderella and her “ugly” sisters. Both heroines are associated with the domestic sphere by way of their work as servants, Snow White for the seven dwarfs and Cinderella for her stepfamily. Their goal in life is to marry handsome princes, yet they must be passive in order to obtain their dream. As Cosslett asserts, Snow White lying waiting for her prince as if dead in a glass coffin after eating the poisoned (Eve’s?) apple is a particularly extreme example of this. Perhaps the only active female characters depicted in the fairytales are the stepmothers. Their resourcefulness, agency, energy and anger are equated with wickedness. On the other hand, the active role of the male character, the Prince, is positively valued. He must undergo a quest requiring bravery, strength and chivalry to reach his goal of rescuing his princess, who has been selected on the basis of her physical beauty, innocence and pureness. (Cosslett, 1996:81) In the words of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the typical princess is “childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that *has no story*.”<sup>21</sup> (Gilbert et.al, 1986:203) All in all, the fairytales reinforce patriarchal ideals of binary masculinity and femininity, which empower the male by equating him with strength and agency, and weaken the female by equating her with beauty, passivity and servile domesticity.

Like the fairytales, the Saharawi stories highlight a domestic role for women. However, the female animals are depicted as the heads of their *jaimas*, that space *belongs* to them and they have *power* over it. Contrastingly, Snow White finds herself

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<sup>21</sup> Italics in original.

in a subordinate position of servitude in the house of the seven dwarfs, whilst Cinderella is a slave in the house of her stepfamily. Similarly, whilst the supposed physical weakness of Cinderella and Snow White is linked to their passivity, a physically weak woman in the Saharawi stories, embodied by the Sheep, is active due to her mental strength. Indeed, as Haidar highlights, due to her physical incapacity, she is “obligada a ser inteligente y precavida”. (Haidar, 2007:246) This is illustrated by a story in which she saves her own life by outwitting a cunning (male) Jackal that had persuaded the sheep’s rather stupid and malleable husband the Elephant to eat her. (Haidar, 2007:84) Haidar comments on this story, “la oveja se comporta como una mujer saharawi estándar, responde y de armas tomar”. (Haidar, 2007:84)

This pattern of the promotion of passivity in women in European tales contrasted with the activity associated with women in Saharawi stories becomes particularly apparent when two strikingly similar plots are compared. Before being fed the fateful snake’s egg, Shreisher Dahbu had had another adventure – she goes in search of her long lost brothers in order to please her mother by bringing them home. On the way, she is tricked by her black female slave into dismounting her camel and thereby giving up her superior social position. The slave bathes in a river of milk in order to turn her own skin white, whilst forcing Shreisher to bathe in a river of tar to turn the latter’s white skin black. Therefore, when she finally finds her brothers, she is mistaken for the slave and forced to work as such, whilst the “real” slave is embraced as the long lost and much-cherished sister. Eventually though, the story is set straight, the slave is killed in punishment by Shreisher’s brothers, and the “real” sister is set free.<sup>22</sup> The plot of this tale is very much paralleled by the European fairytale *The Goose-Girl*,

[A]n old Queen sends off her beautiful daughter, accompanied by a maid, to be married to a distant prince. The Queen gives her daughter a rag stained with three drops of her own blood. During the journey the maid brusquely refuses to bring the Princess a drink of water, saying “I don’t mean to be your servant any longer”. The intimidated Princess only murmurs “Oh! Heaven, what am I to do?” This continues, the maid growing ruder, the Princess meeker, until she loses the rag, whereupon the maid rejoices, knowing that she now has full power over the girl,

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<sup>22</sup> This story would be an interesting object of study for the analysis of the intersection of race or class with gender in traditional Saharawi society. However, this is unfortunately outside the scope of this piece.

‘for in losing the drops of blood the Princess had become weak and powerless.’ The maid commands the Princess to change clothes and horses with her, and never to speak to anyone about what has happened. The possession of the rag had assured the Princess’ social status; without it she becomes *déclassé*, and while her behavior was no less meek and docile before losing the rag than afterwards, there is no formal role reversal until she loses it. Upon their arrival the maid presents herself as the Prince’s bride, while the Princess is given the job of goose-girl. At length, due solely to the intervention of others, the secret is discovered, the maid killed, and the goose girl married to the Prince. (Lieberman, 1986:193)

Considering their analogous plights, it is surprising how different the Saharawi Shreisher and the European Princess are. Firstly, Shreisher shows strong-mindedness, bravery and adventurousness when she independently decides to go out into the world in search of her brothers. Contrastingly, the Princess merely shows obedience to her mother’s wish when she is sent off to marry a far away Prince. Secondly, whilst Shreisher’s misfortune is brought about by uncontrollable magic and trickery, the insipid Princess finds herself in an undesirable position due to the lack of will to resist the domineering maid. Once again, passivity and weakness are presented as European feminine ideals whilst activity and strength of character are valued components of Saharawi femininity. Similarly, the story “El Cobarde que se volvió valiente” concerns a cowardly man who is too scared to fight with the other men from his tribe against their many enemies. His wife offers to fight in his place disguised as him, and is the greatest warrior in each battle that she attends. (Pinto Cebrián and Jiménez Trigueros, 2004: 11-13)

The maternal figure is yet another point where Saharawi stories and European fairytales clash. In the fairytales, the biological mothers of the heroines are dead and thus the only maternal figures are the stepmothers, who are constructed and stereotyped as evil, greedy and jealous. They are as “wicked” as the tens of thousands of “witches” who were burnt at the stake all over Europe between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, the gold-digging stepmothers of Snow White and Cinderella marry their husbands for money and seek the death of their younger, more attractive, more passive stepdaughters. On the other hand, the mother figures in the Saharawi stories are generally well respected and very intelligent. They are wise and should be listened to. This is illustrated by a story in which the ignorant Jackal has a dream in which he is a lion, and when he wakes up he decides to chase greyhounds in order



to prove that he is still the powerful and strong animal of his dream. His intelligent mother advises him,

Hijo mío, sabes bien que sé más que tú; conozco a tu padre y yo soy tu madre, y ninguno de los dos es león, así que no te llesves por lo que has soñado ni hagas lo que has dicho que harás. (Haidar, 2007: 277)

But the Jackal does not heed his mother's counsel, and tells her twice, "(y)o sé más que tú". (Haidar, 2007:277-278) Finally, after being viciously attacked by greyhounds, he crawls home close to death as a result of not adhering to his mother's well-reasoned advice. (Haidar, 2007: 162-166)

The comparisons above illustrate how the European tales create a strict image of the feminine ideal created in opposition to the masculine, whilst this is not generally true of the Saharawi tales outside of the field of sexuality. A brief analysis of a prominent Saharawi male figure serves to strengthen this conclusion. Shertat is the most famous character in the Saharawi oral tradition. He pops up again and again in the stories causing mischief. His bad qualities are endless – gluttonous, selfish, cruel, manipulative, cowardly, disrespectful – whilst his good side is very well disguised. Haidar explains the link between male Saharawi stereotypes and Shertat:

Šartat es el opuesto al hombre ideal Saharawi y, como el hombre ideal no existe, cada saharawi, obligatoriamente, debe tener al menos una de las cualidades del despreciable Šartat. En realidad, por eso no es tan despreciable, pues siempre habrá alguien entre los presentes que sea conocido por una u otra cualidad Šartateña. Somos humanos. Todos, en parte, somos Šartat. (Haidar, 2007: 27)

Perhaps the key idea here lies in the final two sentences, "Somos humanos. Todos ... somos Šartat." We can relate to Shertat as human beings because he is not a two-dimensional character. Like a "real" person, he has all sorts of personality traits, and although most of them are bad, this converts him into a "loveable-rogue". Indeed, all the characters in the Saharawi animal stories display a variety of characteristics. The Hare may be manipulative, but she is also intelligent like the Sheep. In turn, the Sheep has a kind side, like the Hyena. Unlike the male and female representations in the fairytales, the characters here are not displayed as the heavily gendered ideals of what men and women should be. Their gendered personalities crossover and overlap

and do not form the rigid masculine/feminine binary opposition that the fairytales do. However, as we saw earlier, there is one area in which a certain gendered ideal is clearly promoted. Women's sexuality is depicted as dangerous through the character of the Hare, and as shameful and undesirable outside of marriage as the story of Shreisher Dahbú, "El Sacrificio" and "Las hijas de Deilul" illustrate. This could create or add to cultural pressures which negatively influence women's autonomy. One way to combat this would be to rewrite or tell the story in a way that is less sexist, a task which is facilitated by the fact that Saharawi stories are still part of an oral tradition, and therefore their plots and characters are in constant flux. An article that appeared on the *Haz Lo Que Debas* website illustrates how the evolution of the stories with the times is indeed possible:

Los personajes típicos de la narrativa saharauí, el erizo (El Ganfud), la gallina (Lehbara), el chacal (Edib), la liebre (Enerab), o el glotón Shertat, que es reflejo de todo lo que no debe ser un saharauí, también se adaptan a los nuevos tiempos en los cuentos que inventan los jóvenes y los niños en los campamentos.

Los personajes de los cuentos saharauís antes estaban preocupados por buscar pastos, cuidar a sus rebaños, y vivían acampando en jaimas de pelo de camello. Ahora su vida transcurre en los campamentos, revisan sus coches y compran en los comercios. No es bueno ni malo, los cuentos tradicionales convivirán con los más nuevos...<sup>23</sup>

In Europe, feminists have been rewriting stories in feminist ways for many years. As Fiona Mackintosh explains "rewriting operates for the reader by taking a ritualized and stylized narrative and revitalizing it, ironically drawing to our attention the often sexist assumptions and ideologies around which it is created." (Mackintosh, 2004: 163) It has become an important tool for destabilising, deconstructing and questioning patriarchal social structures and their moral values and reoccurring roles concerning gender. Perhaps the more sexist parts of stories such as Shreisher Dahbu could be rewritten in such a way. On the other hand, as this story is part of an oral tradition and I have only had access to one written codification (the only available at this moment), perhaps people have already reimagined the plot along feminist lines and created stories that can compete for social space with the dominant versions in an attempt to disturb the status of the more sexist, fixed constructions of gender.

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<sup>23</sup> *Haz Lo Que Debas*, "Jalga marra. (Érase una vez...)", [http://hazloquedebas.blogspot.com/2007\\_07\\_01\\_archive.html](http://hazloquedebas.blogspot.com/2007_07_01_archive.html), 15 July 2007.

Perhaps in a *jaima* somewhere in the wilderness of the Liberated Territories, or in the sterile and desolate camps, a grandparent is challenging and overturning the more sexist stereotypes of the traditional stories, and imbibing and moulding their grandchildren with new and open attitudes.

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