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## Migration and Crossing Borders in Zahra, favorita de Al-Andalús

Lynn C. Purkey

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, lynn-purkey@utc.edu

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Migration and Crossing Borders in *Zahra, favorita de Al-Aldalus*

Voy a hablaros de la inocencia y de la traición, del lujo y del hambre, del hombre y de la mujer, del norte y del sur, del ayer y del mañana... Dejadme elegir mi camino bajo las estrellas que me conducirán al oasis de vuestros corazones. (*Zahra* 241)

Gender and identity are at the heart of Antonia Bueno Mingallón's trilogy *Sancha, Zahra y Raquel* (2009).<sup>1</sup> This tendency is made manifest in *Zahra, favorita de Al-Andalus* (2002), which deals with two women, the medieval Zahra Andalusí, a "Basque" captive destined for the Caliph's harem, and the modern Zahra Magrebí seeking refuge in twenty-first-century Spain. The title and characters take their name from a legendary and probably apocryphal Zahra or al-Zahra, purportedly Abd al-Rahman III's favorite concubine, for whom he named his elegant and stately palace Medinat al-Zahra (Mourtada-Saba and Gully 191, "Arabic Poetry" 171). In this work Bueno's representation of women reinforces the notion of a shared past between the two regions of the Mediterranean, while simultaneously deconstructing the notion of a homogenous Spanish nation of which she remains skeptical. Instead the play deals with the very current issue of North African immigration to Spain and the timelessly universal themes of human trafficking, abuse, and exploitation, as well as inherently unfair social systems. Bueno's re-inscription of feminine subjectivity examines womanhood from Medieval Spain to the modern day, questioning stereotypes, while postulating a new model of sisterhood. Linked by name, travel, and childbirth, the two Zahras are mirror images whose efforts to overcome their social and geographic limits unite them in the oneiric space of dreams, as they struggle for survival and the future of their progeny. This article explores migration and movement across boundaries in *Zahra* as key aspects of the (de-)construction of national identity, the restructuring of colonial relations, and the reevaluating feminine subjectivity.

*Zahra* is organized through the trope of migration, beginning with the journey of one protagonist and ending with that of the other. The two Zahras lead parallel lives, both crossing borders to become the "exoticized other" in journeys that define them and set the course of their lives. For one it signals an escape of sorts and the realization of personhood, even as it ends in tragedy. For the other it is the beginning of a life of luxurious confinement and court intrigue, resulting in an enduring myth and personal failure. Separated by a millennium, the two Zahras meet in the surrealist world of dreams, conflating their shared experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> Lourdes Bueno Pérez has indicated that historical themes in this trilogy allow the author to to reflect upon the social injustices, which women suffer in the modern age as well as the past: "Antonia Bueno se sumerge de lleno en la Historia para dar vida y, sobre todo, voz a los personajes femeninos que, no sólo en el pasado sino incluso en nuestro presente, sufren la

objectification and frustrated motherhood. The trope of migration then, one forced and one voluntary, shape and intertwine the lives of the two women, whose destiny brings them to Al Andalus, where Orient and Occident collide.

Migration has become a particularly salient theme of late in postmodern literature. According to Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi, contemporary society is characterized by ever increasing migration and an abundance of literary tropes associated with it (1). Although recent migrations tend to be from “less affluent countries such as former colonial outposts,” migrations have occurred “from ancient times to our days,” typically involving “multiple articulations of difference” (2).

Since the colonial period, difference has become ever more significant, as a means of separating the colonizer from the colonized subjects and as a means of justifying and retaining unequal power relations (2). In recent history globalization has created a reverse phenomenon in which (former) colonial subjects are migrating to Europe, where “national boundaries” have become “highly porous.” This fact has inspired writers to “re-imagine and re-construct notions of political belonging along ethnic and religious identifications,” a process which “signif[ies] all possible processes of identification and dis-identification relating to the trespassing of borders and of ‘off-limits’ territories” (3). It is for this reason that migration can also be connected with home or a longing for home, dislocation, and time.

Hence migration becomes a literal and a metaphorical transition in space but also a transition in time. It refers to a past and present whose territorial boundaries do not overlap anymore. [...] It refers to a notion of home that becomes an abstraction, a desire for a lost origin, an ideal setting for nostalgia and memory, whereas migrancy becomes a new location to be inhabited, a new form of self-writing and imagining. (3).

Yet in its essence, migration as a literary trope “is meant to express the reopened traffic between center and periphery, to contest those frontiers that cut across languages, cultures, and religions in hegemonic ways, and to convey the space where multiple selves, origins, and belongings can be articulated and jostled” (3). Moreover, migration has become increasingly accessible in the Postmodern Age, a fact owed to the “shrinking planet,” and ever improving technology, despite its unequal distribution among nations (Augé 25-26).

Migration is explored in some of these ways in *Zahra*. The work is paradoxically both a search for home and lost origins and a “new location to be inhabited,” an abstraction that is both a transition in space and time. Concomitantly the play explores the unequal power relations between the former colony and colonizer and between the two genders, even as it explores feminine subjectivity and the migrant experience.

The most obvious use of migration in *Zahra* is related to movement across space, especially across the stage and geographic borders, but also across other frontiers, including ethnic, linguistic, temporal, and gender boundaries. Just as migration, space has become a concern for a growing number of postmodern critics. In her study of postmodern fantastical literature, Patricia García argues that space is a human construct “by which we organize the world”:

Space [...] is a means by which we organize the world. This, in turn, introduces the category of space as a man-made construction. Such an understanding of space represents a radical departure from the tradition that has predominated in Western culture for centuries [...]. Space [...] is constructed by the human for the human. (García 1)

Space is a key aspect of *Zahra*, and is employed in a very obvious way on stage and across political boundaries, as well as in some less obvious ways. Scenic space is at times traditional, e.g. on the stage, and at others breaks the fourth wall, calling upon the audience to participate in the play, which as Victoria Ketz comments, is in concert with Berthold Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* or Alienation Effect (78). The importance of migration and space is highlighted in the two opening scenes, the first of which begins in the vestibule of the theater, which is a *zoco*, an Arabian market place, through which spectators meander until they hear the summons of the *almuédano*-narrator (*Zahra* 239-40). The latter’s monologue begins the play, when he strikes his staff on the floor three times; the wall falls revealing the theater; and he invites the audience to take their seats in the “medina teatral,” described as “el cuarto de las maravillas, la cueva de Alí Babá” (241). As spectators fill the theater, perfumed with incense and musk, lights illuminate a sand-covered stage, giving the impression of a magical tableau, surrounded by the sights and smells of the ancient Orient (239-42). In this manner, Bueno delineates a space that is not only historical, but also evokes the magic of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

Besides sand, the other main stage prop is a magical carpet, “emblema de la cultura árabe,” upon which most of the play’s action takes place (Doll 152), and which echoes Aladdin’s flying carpet. Scene III opens with the arrival of Zahra Andalusí carrying the carpet, a sign of both her confinement and conveyance. For example, in Scene III Zahra Andalusí is trapped and captured by Abderramán or Abd al-Rahman III in the borders of the carpet. It is also the scene of Córdoba’s and Zahra Medina’s harems. Serving as a home and prison for Zahra Magrebí, the carpet becomes a tomb, in which the protagonist has become a yoked mule and her life as an endless circle:

MADRE: La mujer solo deja su casa dos veces en la vida..., para ira la boda o a la tumba.

ZAHRA: Mi tumba está aquí..., dentro de estas cuatro paredes.  
[...]

MADRE: Tienes tu casa.

ZAHRA: ¿Mi casa?... Estoy cansada de dar vueltas como una mula en la noria, alrededor del patio. Necesito romper este círculo..., abrir la puerta..., salir..., caminar en la línea recta. (*Zahra* 281-82)

The carpet on stage also serves to delineate time frames and movement from one point on the map to another. For example, in some of the early scenes of the play, Zahra Andalusi inhabits the carpet, while the modern characters remain on its fringes or outside of it. The carpet becomes a means of conveyance across geographic spaces as a litter for Zahra Andalusi and a dingy for Zahra Magrebi, serving as a sign of imprisonment and as the hope for freedom respectively.

Movement through time is another key aspect of *Zahra*, reflected in the two diegetic levels of the play and in the medieval Zahra's aging body.<sup>2</sup> While most of the play's action takes place in the two diegetic levels, the medieval Al-Andalus and the modern Maghreb (and briefly the Mediterranean and Andalusia), there is a third time, a dreamscape, which is either out-of-time or from a future perspective, which is seen for example, in Scene I, in which the Narrator introduces the "historia" (240). Since the term can mean either "story" or "history" in Spanish it gives a sense of being either from a future prospective, or completely out of time, since the usually extradiegetic narrator only intervenes in the action of the play in the dreamscape. Similarly, Scene II is narrated from the perspective of an omniscient Narrator, the *fakir*, who mixes past, present, and future. Most of the following scenes alternate between the present and the medieval past, which given the minimalist props on stage, are encoded in the characters' clothes, accoutrements, and music. However, in some instances timelines cross and both protagonists are on stage, and there are surrealist scenes that seem to be out of time, as one finds in Scene VI, in which the two Zahras dream about each other. One ramification of these two temporal narratives and their improbable mixing is that time is cyclical. This is reinforced by the doubling of the heroine, who mirror each other: their lives continue to circle like the waterwheel, a journey that never changes and seemingly has no escape.<sup>3</sup>

The preoccupation with time is also reinforced in the figure of the medieval Zahra's body, which reminds one of the tragic and tragi-comedic women battling time in Federico García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* and *Doña Rosita la soltera*, as well as the theme of frustrated motherhood in *Yerma*.

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<sup>2</sup> Ketz has indicated a connection between space and time in this play, which "allows for religion to be portrayed differently," a fact that she connects with Homi Bhabha's theories on spatial time (88).

<sup>3</sup> Eileen Doll describes time as circular in this work through the birth of Zahra Magrebi's daughter Noor at the end of the play and the use of the carpet at the beginning and end (213).

Once the harem favorite, the aging Zahra becomes like her namesake, forgotten, abandoned, and irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

Movement across borders in *Zahra* is further manifested at the textual level, overturning notions of linguistic purity through mixing languages, interspersing Spanish with Arabic, an act which, Doll argues is superficial for the most part and creates a more realistic atmosphere (73), but it also serves to privilege the language of the “Other.” This intermingling is yet another example of migration or movement across borders, one that parallels the history of the Spanish language, to which Arabic has made a considerable contribution (Lapesa 135, Penny 217-18).<sup>5</sup>

Yet another movement across borders is found in the migration of blood. As the critic Lourdes Bueno Pérez has noted, blood serves a symbolic function in Bueno’s dramatic production, representing both life and death (“Preámbulo” 5-8).<sup>6</sup> In *Zahra* movement across bloodlines deconstructs notions of racial purity. This hybridity is perhaps most obvious in Abderramán III, who is the product of European and Arabic bloodlines. In Scene VIII, he indicates that his mother Muzna and grandmother Oneca were Basques like Zahra, although the term Basque in this time period, might refer to anyone from the North (*Zahra* 256, “Mothers” 72-73).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to some experts, the hybridity of the Umayyad Dynasty was so great that the rulers were often blond and blue-eyed, as Abderramán III, who had “white skin” and blue eyes, and darkened his blond or reddish hair and beard to appear more “Arab” (“Mothers” 69, 72, Vallvé 26). Thus, the emirate’s family serves as a microcosm of society, reflecting the general mixing of bloodlines that took place in Al-Andalus and elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula.

The theme of ethnic hybridity in *Zahra* points to a similar religious phenomenon, which took place in Medieval Spain, a conflictive coexistence, if

<sup>4</sup> Constructed from 1936-1948, the palatial Medinat al-Zahra was “sacked and burned” in dynastic struggle in 1010 (Mathews et al 308, “Arabic Poetry” 171-72).

<sup>5</sup> These loan words into Castilian Spanish were not later borrowings due to Castile’s occupation of lands once held by Arabic speakers, but rather from the Moorish occupation itself (Penny 217). Rather they resulted from “the need for names applicable to the many new concepts [...] which reached Castile from Al-Andalus” and “the very high prestige associated with Arabic in the early Middle Ages, owing to the fact that Arabic was the vehicle of a culture which was considerably more ‘advanced’ than that of Christian Spain, and indeed than that of the rest of Christian Europe” (Penny 218).

<sup>6</sup> Bueno Pérez connects wine and blood with “lasciviousness,” evident in Abderramán’s use of alcohol, forbidden under Islamic law, and his desire for Zahra, while Ketz connects wine with sacrilege, noting Abderramán’s use of Christian terms in his seduction of Zahra (“Dualidad” 22, Ketz 89).

<sup>7</sup> The historical Abd al-Raman III’s mother Muzna or Muzaina was either Basque or Frankish, and his paternal grandmother Oneca, Onneca, or Iñiga, was the daughter of Fortún Garcés, the King of Pamplona (Cabrera 71, “Mothers” 72-73, Fletcher 53, Vallvé 17-18, 21).

less than tolerant *convivencia*.<sup>8</sup> The trilogy to which *Zahra* belongs, *Sancha, Zahra, y Raquel*, centers upon the three representatives of the three “great” religions which took root in the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula, the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths. There are frequent references to both Islam and Christianity throughout the play, as well as to the uneasy relationship between the two. For example, Abderramán III seduces Zahra with the aid of wine, which he likens to Christ’s blood and admits that it is forbidden for Muslims (Ketz 88, *Zahra* 286). Religious and ethnic hybridity serve as grounds for Zahra’s harassment in the harem, reminding the spectator of the uneasy relations in Medieval Spain, encoded in the threat to racial and religious purity that the “Basque” Christian in the harem poses:

FÁTIMA: ¡De rodillas! ¡Ponte de rodillas, cristiana, ante una descendiente del Profeta!... [...] ¡Eres una víbora entre las víboras!... ¿Crees que ese hijo que llevas en el vientre llegará a ser califa de los creyentes?... ¡Basta ya de esclavas del norte que vienen a Córdoba a implantar su satánica semilla en nuestro linaje!  
(*Zahra* 276)

Crossing linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries in *Zahra* reminds one that, despite expulsions and religious conversions, discourses of “purity” cannot be trusted; Spain’s very history belies them. Thus, the themes of migration and hybridity deconstruct the notion of a homogenous Spanish nation both in terms of Spain’s medieval past and of contemporary North African immigration, as will be discussed in further detail below.

Movement across boundaries in *Zahra*, is intimately connected to the western constructs of Orient and Occident, power relations, and the dismantling of national borders. Indeed, *Zahra* is in dialogue with a long tradition of Orientalized, dark-haired beauties in Hispanic letters, like those famously depicted in Espronceda’s “A jarifa en una orgia” and Bécquer’s Rima XI (“Yo soy ardiente, yo soy morena”). Yet, although the black-eyed *Zahra Magrebí* seems in concert with this tradition, in *Zahra Andalusí*, Bueno displaces the sultry dark-haired, brown-skinned object of masculine desire, with a blue-eyed, blonde European, thereby conflating blonde and brunette, European and North African in one object or archetype of masculine desire, and dismantling the artificial dichotomies of blonde/brunette, light-skinned/dark-skinned, cold/passionate, virgin/prostitute, North/South, and Occident/Orient.<sup>9</sup> This displacement is implied

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<sup>8</sup> Safran has indicated that there was already a great deal of cultural, religious, and ethnic hybridity in Islamic Hispania, which resulted in conflicts a century prior to Abderramán’s reign (183).

<sup>9</sup> While *Zahra* does not deal with prostitution, it does deal with feminine desire and women who transgress the boundaries set for “respectable” women. *Zahra Magrebí*, who engaged in sexual relations before marriage, fakes her virginity. In this way, she is undermining the two stereotypes to which women must often conform. In the last scene of the play the narrator collapses the two

by the narrator, a sort of masculine and mystical Scheherazade. In Scene V he suggests that the two are *Doppelgängers* with phrases like “dos promesas de Alá,” “Las dos caras de un dirham,” “dos mitades de una jugosa naranja”:

NARRADOR: Miradlas, vosotros que tenéis ojos:  
 Una engalanada de seda y pedrería...  
 La otra engalanada con su mejor sonrisa.  
 Dos promesas de Alá, dos esplendores.  
 Las dos caras de un *dirham* plateado  
 Dos lunas florecientes.  
 Zahra... Zahra...  
 Un Andalus glorioso  
 Un Magreb que despierta  
 Espejos que se buscan en aguas del Tiempo. [...]  
 Son las dos mitades de una jugosa naranja. Una llega rodando como una lágrima desde el norte; la otra sube, henchida con su semilla, desde el sur. El Estrecho es la vasija donde se juntarán sus jugos. Yo seré el fakir que reúna los dos pedazos de un bello fruto.  
 (*Zahra* 251)

This suggests the unification of both Zahras into a single archetypal woman, indicating a Borges-like cyclical time, a self-perpetuating circle in which Zahra, a symbol of all women, repeats an endless and seemingly inevitable pattern, reinforced by the narrator’s comment, “La historia es una eternal tragicomedia, donde solo cambian los papeles y las mascararas...” (*Zahra* 261).

The conflation of the two protagonists is even more obvious in the dream sequence in the following scene, “Zahra sueña a Zahra,” in which the two protagonists switch places.<sup>10</sup>

Zahra Magrebí: Hoy tuve un hermoso sueño. Mi cabello era dorado,  
 ricas sedas envolvían mi cuerpo y mi casa era un fragante jardín.  
 Zahra Andalusí: ¡Qué cruel pesadilla! Corría por áridas tierras envuelta en llanto... y mi meta era el negro mar. (*Zahra* 252)

At first glance, the choice of male narrator who resolves problems seems to imply a subconscious reliance on the male to mend female problems. Yet, that is not the case: the position of *fakir* implies asceticism and the cleansing of one’s soul in the Sufi and Indian traditions, so it is a male gaze that is not threatening. Another reason for the magical male storyteller, may be found in Bueno’s dialogue with *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade

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extremes of sexual behavior, stating “He sido virgin./He sido prostituta,” which undermines their distinction (*Zahra* 312).

<sup>10</sup> Bueno Pérez notes the unification of the two Zahras in dream in Scene VI and in death in Scene XXIV (“Análisis” 189).

continually tells entertaining stories to avoid being killed. In this case, the storyteller is masculine, while the protagonists are feminine, which reverses the gender roles of the classic, subverting the model of Scheherazade, bride, storyteller, object of desire, and potential victim of serial violence. Yet another reason might be that the use of a positive male character provides a more balanced view of Muslim men, and in this way avoids categorizing all Muslim men as abusive or lascivious, a notion which is further reinforced in the depiction of Al-Hakan (the historical Al-Hakam II), who is first an innocent child and later Zahra's bookish friend. The rebellion against the narrator in Scene XIII, discussed in further detail below, also provides a space for women to reject the patriarchal order, and in the last scene of the play, the magical *fakir* claims to be both male and female, oppressor and oppressed (*Zahra* 312-13).

In other regards, Bueno overturns similar dichotomies of East/West, Africa/Europe, and Colony/Colonizer. Her use of a Maghreb protagonist as an example of the "oriental other" is ironic, poking fun at the very notion of the Orient. Comprising the Atlas Mountains and the coastlands of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the Maghreb is geographically as far west as most of Western Europe, and in Arabic the term means "west."<sup>11</sup> While one cannot state with certainty that Bueno was aware of such a meaning, her use of Arabic elsewhere in the text, suggests this choice was intentionally satirical.

Moreover, the author's use of the Maghreb evokes an entire history of African-Spanish relations. When referring to ancient times, the term includes Moorish Spain during the Middle Ages (711-1492), and the Castilian colonization of North Africa beginning in the late fifteenth century. The Maghreb also refers to a number of areas once occupied by Spain, such as Libya, parts of which were colonized by Spain in the late sixteenth century, the still disputed Spanish Sahara, the Spanish protectorates of Melilla and Ceuta, and Spanish Morocco (Rif), which was not conceded to its inhabitants until 1956. In recent memory the latter evokes the site of the bloody military campaigns of the 1910s and 1920s. Thus, on the whole the term Maghreb highlights the cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic migrations that have transgressed the porous borders between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

The choice of the Caliphate of Córdoba and the Moorish occupation of Spain is another aspect of *Zahra* that highlights these permeable boundaries between Spain and Africa, even as it deconstructs notions of Western superiority by inverting the colonial power structure, since "Orient" dominates "Occident" in this instance. Indeed, during the Middle Ages "Moorish" Spain was markedly technologically superior to "Christian" Europe (Fletcher 65, Lapesa 132).

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<sup>11</sup> The Maghreb (or Maghrib in British English) usually refers to areas of North Africa adjacent to the Mediterranean, although it may also include Moorish Spain. The word's origin can be found in the Arabic word for "west" (Goetz 671, "Maghreb").

Roughly the size of Constantinople, Córdoba was the largest city in Western Europe during the Reign of Abd al-Rahman III and his son Al-Hakam II, as well as a vital cultural and intellectual center (Fletcher 64-66).

In a similar vein, Bueno overturns the stereotype of the possessing European gaze into the possessing gaze of the “Other” or perhaps more accurately, men in general. The only important “Christian” male in the play is a Slavic eunuch Yafar, whose devotion to Zahra is of necessity platonic. Therefore, the men who exhibit a possessing gaze are present-day North Africans and medieval *moros*. While at first glance this appears to be a simplistic Orientalizing bias, that is probably not the case. In Bueno’s other plays, European Christians fare no better. For example, in *Sancha, Reina de la Hispania*, the very *castizo* Don Sancho, King of Navarra tries to rape the seventeen-year-old Sancha (*Sancha* 128-30). His abuse of his position as king and kinsman, while the girl mourns the death of a beloved nephew, make him all the more despicable. In *Zahra* there are also some admirable Muslim men, such as Al-Hakan and the fakir. Thus, it is likely that Bueno is not critical of “Moors” in particular, but rather societies and individuals that repress women and promote unequal gender relations.

To be more precise, the playwright deconstructs the artificial separation of nations and cultures, drawing our attention to the comingling of European and North African in Spain’s past and present, which brings her in dialogue with theories of Postcolonialism and Edward Said’s critique of Western hegemony in *Orientalism*. In this book Said asks if orientalism or indeed any studies of a colonized nation may be viewed in an objective manner, outside of the cultural and political prejudices, and the dominating position of the conqueror or colonizer, opining that “‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are man-made” terms, that describe not so much a geographic difference, but an imaginary cultural and psychological divide, which is based upon differences in power relations: “The difference between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony [...]” (Said 5).

In this regard, *Zahra* does a great deal to deconstruct power relations, which it does by contrasting the two timelines, one which takes place at the height of the Umayyad Dynasty’s power, which overturns notions of an inferior Orient, while reminding the audience of the relative backwardness of Christian Europe compared to the splendor of Al-Andalus. It is no accident that Bueno has selected the historical Zahra/Azahra (al-Zahra) as her protagonist: the legendary al-Zahra was purportedly Abd al-Rahman III’s favorite concubine, for whom he named his opulent new palace and seat of government, during the period in which the Umayyad Dynasty of Córdoba was at its height of power (Mourtada-Sabbah & Gully 190-91).

However, one should note that while *Zahra* overturns power relations, it does not ignore gender inequity. Some postcolonial critics might object to its

treatment of gender relations in North Africa and Muslim Spain. However, the depiction of intrigues in the Cordovan harems is historical. Bueno's tale of treachery, deceit, and poison is loosely based upon historical precedent. During the Umayyad Emirate, Tarub and her eunuch Nasr attempted to poison Abd al-Rahman II, Abd al-Rahman III's father, in order to secure the succession of her son to the throne (Mourtada-Sabbah & Gully 188-89). This should not be read, however, as simply a criticism of the "spiteful" or "malicious" nature of women; rather it serves as a reminder and condemnation of social systems, which encourages competition between women, whose power comes from their relationships to men.

The juxtaposition of Zahra Andalusí's pre-harem and post-harem life seems to suggest a criticism of this very system, while bringing to mind the myths of a prehistoric matriarchal Basque society or perhaps the freedom afforded by youth.<sup>12</sup>

ZAHRA: ¡Cuánto echo de menos correr por la sierra..., y beber agua fresca de mis fuentes..., y ser dueña de mi corazón, de mi cabeza y de mis ojos!... Por muy amante que sea Abderramán, yo estoy siempre aquí..., encerrada..., sometida a su capricho... (Zahra 269)

Beyond the deconstruction of orientalism and power relations, perhaps the "Other" in the form of women are Bueno's chief concern in this work and indeed her theatrical production on the whole. Her subjects lack agency primarily because of their status as women in their society (or as undocumented immigrants in modern Spain); and in this sense her work is universal.

Bueno criticizes dominant institutions, even as she proposes that women unite to fight against those that oppress them. This is most evident in her criticism of sexual trafficking, especially that of children, a theme consistent with Zahra Andalusí in ancient times and with Malika, Hassan's second wife in the modern narrative thread:

AL-HAKAN: ¿Cuántos años tienes?

ZAHRA: Trece

AL-HAKAN: Igual que yo. (*A su padre*) Padre... ¿Podemos llevarla con nosotros?

ABDERRAMÁN: ¿El primogénito del emir pide permiso para tomar una esclava?

AL-HAKAN: Me gustaría que fuera mi compañera de juegos.

ABDERRAMÁN: (*Riéndose.*) No, hijo mío... Tu padre está pensando destinar esta niña a otros juegos... [...] Ahora sólo soy

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<sup>12</sup> The Basque Country and Galicia are rumored to have originally been matriarchal societies, but this probably has little basis in fact (Kelley 72).

emir; tú apenas una niña... [...] Tú y yo vamos a crecer, niña mía... (*Zahra* 256)

Implicit in *Zahra's* journey is a criticism of the sexual exploitation and treatment of women as chattel, especially children. Although it is commonplace to excuse sexual acts with minors in the ancient world as relative to another culture and different social norms, Bueno's repeated comments draw her audience's attention to *Zahra's* youth: she is thirteen, the same age as Abderramán's son; he addresses her as *niña*, and mentions growing up and playing games, which highlights her lack of maturity in contrast with the Caliph's greater size, strength, and age.

Sexual predation is also suggested in Hassan's second wife, Malika. At one point *Zahra Magrebí* complains, "Malika es casi una niña..., y no ha parado de tener hijos. ¡Ya va por el tercero!" (*Zahra* 265). Although Malika has not been forced, the underlying subtext is that she is too young to be married and having children.

Pedophilia is very explicitly dealt with in Bueno's monologue, *La niña tumbada* (2005), which is based upon a newspaper story from Central America, about a girl who was gang raped.<sup>13</sup> The title in and of itself resonates with many things: *tumba*, grave; *tumbada*, the past participle of the verb *tumbar*, to knock down, to cut down (trees, plants, etc.), to wound gravely or kill, to fall down, to lay down, to knock out, among other meanings (*Diccionario* 2242). The idiomatic expression, *soy una tumba*, means to be silent, literally "I am a grave"; and *niña* is a signifier of both youth and gender. "Tumbada" is also a euphemism in Central America for raped (*La niña tumbada* 270).<sup>14</sup> It therefore conflates the feminine child's experience of rape, violence, and death (of rat poisoning to avoid pregnancy) with her silence from the tomb. Together with the other children's voices, it implies the silence of multiple victims of sexual violence, whose stories are never told and whose abusers go unpunished.

As the narratorial voice speaks from beyond the grave, the audience undergoes a process of defamiliarization, interpreting the gruesome rape through the eyes of a child, who is initially confused by what she is experiences:<sup>15</sup>

LA NIÑA: ¿Qué es esto que moja mis muslos?... (*Se toca. Luego mira aterrada sus manos.*) ¡Es sangre!... (*Intenta confortarse con su propia sonrisa.*) No boba, es el mes, que llegó de nuevo. Ya

<sup>13</sup> Bueno Pérez has noted that violence against women, rape, and the termination of pregnancy are frequent themes in Bueno's theater ("Dualidad simbólica" 7).

<sup>14</sup> Patricia O'Connor has noted the following meanings of *tumbada*: "knocked over," "pushed down," "toppled," "tumbled," and in Central America "raped" (284).

<sup>15</sup> My colleague, Oralia Preble-Niemi, mentioned to me that the 2003 novel and 2009 film *The Lovely Bones* uses the technique of the victim's voice from beyond the grave. *La niña tumbada* appeared before the movie, but after the novel was published. Thus, it is possible that there is a connection, although the two works differ significantly.

mamá me explicó el mes pasado, cuando me vino por vez primera. [...] Ella dice que ya no soy una niña... Que ya “todo” es diferente... ¿Que ahora debo tener mucho cuidado... ¿Qué querrá decir?... A mí me parece que nada cambió. (*La niña* 272)

The audience perceives her rape, death, and afterlife through the victim’s voice, which allows the playwright to adroitly handle the indelicate subject revealed in the following passage:

LA NIÑA: Siento que se abren mis carnes. ¡Duele, mamá! ¡Cómo duele!... ¿Es esto ser mujer?... ¡Yo no quiero ser mujer! [...] Tengo mi cabeza llena de cosas... y de olores... y de ruidos. Mi cabecita es pequeña, no metáis más cosas en ella... Os lo suplico. Por favor... No metáis nada más dentro de mí... Dejad que me levante... Dejadme sola con mi silencio... Dejadme seguir esperando a mamá... Devolvedme el ayer que me robasteis. (*La niña* 273)

The scene begins by focusing upon blood, the girl’s pain, which it conflates with the experience of becoming a woman. As the focalization of the passage switches to the unnamed second person plural, the cause of the blood and torn flesh becomes clear, as do the gang rape. Thus, read through the lens of *La niña tumbada*, the subtext of pedophilia in *Zahra* is all the more evident.

In addition to theme of sexual exploitation, *Zahra* also critiques domestic abuse:

SITT: [...] ¿Te pega?

ZAHRA: (*Bajando la cabeza.*) Lo normal.

SITT: ¿Con una varilla de dientes, como manda el Sagrado Libro? (*Zahra asiente.*) Entonces, ¿de qué te quejas? Si no hay señal, no hay falta. (*Zahra* 264)

This conversation confirms not only that Hasan beats his wife, Zahra Magrebí, but that it is a “normal” practice for women of her community, which, nevertheless causes shame, hence the bowing of her head. Bueno usually avoids stereotypes and criticism aimed at ethnic or religious groups; nevertheless, in this case, she denounces religious law that condones domestic abuse, revealed in “¿Con una varilla de dientes, como manda el Sagrado Libro.” This theme is repeated elsewhere, in Scene XIII, in which Zahra rebels against the narrator, an act anticipated in Miguel de Unamuno’s *Niebla* (1914) and Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), but which takes a feminist turn:

Zahra: ¡No, narrador! ¡Basta ya! ¡Se acabó! No me gusta el papel que me has asignado. [...]

Narrador: ¡Arrepiéntete, hija mía, de tus torpes palabras! Toda mujer depende del padre o del marido. Tienes que obedecer la Ley de Dios.

Zahra: Prefiero obedecer la Ley de los Hombres... Y de las mujeres. (*Zahra* 273)

Bueno breaks the cycle of abuse and violence in the surreal space of dreams, in which the two temporal threads are joined. However, the dramatic author does not refer to this dream world in terms of Surrealism, which would make sense, given the fact that her play is in some ways reminiscent of García Lorca's theater in its themes of frustrated motherhood and its depiction of the repression of women, or Antonio Buero Vallejo's drama, especially *El sueño de la razón*, which combines Surrealism, the mixing of time lines, social critique, and historical events (e.g., the life of Goya, the French Invasion of Spain, and the despotic reign of Fernando VII). Instead Bueno connects her work to Magical Realism, "donde el sueño convive con la realidad aparente, lo subjetivo con lo objetivo, la metáfora con la anécdota, lo cotidiano con lo maravilloso" ("Introducción" 15). Certainly, *Zahra* suggests magic and through real, legendary, and new fictional characters she deals with very real issues facing women and migrants today. Thus, it is probably fair to say that both movements are applicable to *Zahra*, working in concert to achieve feminist harmony, evoked through the *deus ex machina* of the *fakir* and the dream world (*Zahra* 251).

In *Zahra's* search for reality and engagement with contemporary problems, it contemplates the import of geographic borders and the chauvinism associated with nationalism. In *Imagined Nations*, Benedict Anderson invites the reader to reflect upon the problems of geographic boundaries and modern states, suggesting that nationalism plays a key role in the development of individual consciousness, beliefs, and the way in which one perceives oneself. However, nationalism is also the source of antagonism between modern nations and their subjects. Anderson deconstructs notions of nationalism or "nation-ness", stating that they are "cultural artefacts," which only came about in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries after the advent of "print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (4, 36). He bases this conclusion on the premise that the modern nation is an "imagined political community" (6). His assumption that the nation is an imagined community rests upon the fact there are so many citizens in a given nation that they cannot possibly know each other: "[...] all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact [...] are imagined" (6). His theory is also based upon the fact that "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" or "fraternity," connected through "*particular* languages and their association with *particular* territorial units" (7, 43). Theorizing the nation as a social construct allows Anderson to undermine the sacral position it holds in modern society and to censure some of the unfortunate consequences of nationalism.

Anderson's view of the nation as a human construct is reflected in *Zahra*, in which the two protagonists cross geographical borders to become subject to another set of laws and another rule. The unification and shared experience of the displaced Maghreb and "Basque" demonstrate the artificiality of boundaries and ethnic differences, pointing instead to Spain's shared history with North Africa, and the common experiences of women in ancient caliphates and modern nation states.

Through Zahra Magrebí, Bueno tackles the thorny issue of North African immigration to Spain. The police helicopters and news coverage in Scene XX are clear markers of these conflicts between modern nation states, and the dehumanizing treatment of the undocumented in Scene XXIV bears witness to Spain's immigration policies and the desperation and poverty of those who seek asylum there. While one might see this as a particular response to local Spanish and North African issues, it has obvious reverberations throughout the European Union and indeed elsewhere. Bueno's critique of modern nationhood and of immigration policies are as relevant for the Americas as they are for Europe and its former colonies.

In this way *Zahra's* themes are universal, reflecting upon different imagined communities and timeframes, while focusing on the plight of women. Zahra Magrebí's "Dios mío, líbrame del ayer," and Zahra Andalusí's "Señor, protégeme del mañana" suggest that little has changed (*Zahra* 252). They are also a metaphorical call to arms in defense of women. While the lives of women have improved over the past millennium, Bueno suggests that modern nations like Spain, are not yet the paradise that immigrants envision:

Voluntario: Pronto [Zahra Magrebí] habría descubierto que esto [España] no es el paraíso. (*Zahra* 307)

Yet, despite its tragic dénouement, *Zahra's* end is not entirely bleak. As María Jesús Orozco Vera indicates, *Zahra* is structured through a sort of "viaje interior" which "permitirá transformar la realidad, trazar un camino de esperanza para la hija de Zahra Maghrebí" (Orozco Vera ccxxvii). Zahra Magrebí gives birth to Noor/Luz on Spanish soil, postulating "una nueva identidad híbrida" (Doll 158). The legacy of both Zahras, Noor/Luz, literally light, symbolizes hope (Doll 189, Orozco Vera ccxxvii).

This impression is reinforced by the exhortation to join together in collective voice (*Zahra* 313):

Narrador: [...] Soy la voz antigua de la Memoria que habita vuestros sueños.  
Soy vosotros. Soy tú. Soy él. Soy ella.  
Somos la voz del tiempo.  
Cantad...  
Cantad conmigo la indestructible melodía del Tiempo...

(*Zahra* 313)

Here, the conflation of the past, “la voz Antigua de la memoria,” present (“Somos la voz del tiempo), and the future perspective implied in the command, “Cantad conmigo,” draws the audience’s attention to the significance and interconnectedness of voice in shaping the course of time (*Zahra* 313). The use of first, second, and third persons is an appeal for everyone to come together and participate in social change. The play ends symbolically by unifying both genders and both “shores” (Spain and North Africa), which has the obvious ramifications of destructing the boundaries that separate nation states and genders.

*Zahra* explores national origins and the search for “home,” the “new location to be inhabited,” which is manifested through movement across spatial, temporal, ethnic, religious, and gender boundaries. The trope of migration provokes the audience to reflect upon the relationship between Africa and Spain in particular, and more broadly between colony and colonizer, migrant and native, male and female, ultimately deconstructing fixed notions of national identity and blurring boundaries. Most importantly, as much of Bueno’s oeuvre, this play is “a new form of self-writing and imagining,” one which condemns the victimization of women and unequal power relations, and which portrays the strength and determination of those who rebel against assigned roles and clamor for their voices to be heard.

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