

## **Home and Belonging in Mila Younes’ *Nomade***

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary literary theory has emphasized the way in which migrant literatures have problematized the fixedness of ‘home’ by using the notion of ‘home’ as ‘a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will.’<sup>1</sup> Whether associated with a nostalgic longing for an irretrievable place or an unrealised/able future, ‘home’ is often constructed as ‘the desire for a place that does not exist.’<sup>2</sup> Critics of literatures written in diasporic contexts have at times interpreted this permanent quest for belonging in terms of a ‘creative tension’ between a ‘homing desire’ and a critique of ‘discourses of fixed origins’<sup>3</sup> often articulated alongside a critique of ‘home’ as ‘the illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance.’<sup>4</sup> More recently, ecocriticism has offered new insights into the construction of ‘home’ by highlighting the shared materiality between humans and nature and developed the idea of the earth as a ‘common home’ erasing the boundaries between humans and the environment.<sup>5</sup> Ursula Heise argues that such an approach could help ‘envision how ecologically-based advocacy on behalf of the non-human world as well as on behalf of greater socio-environmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer as primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole.’<sup>6</sup> This paper attempts to combine this notion of a shared environment and the idea of ‘home’ as the desire for an imaginary place to look at the ways in which ‘home’ can be articulated as a site of political resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.200.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Buikema, ‘A Poetics of Home: On Narrative Voice and the Deconstruction of Home in Migrant Literature’ in *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-colonial Europe*, ed. by Sandra Ponzanese and Daniela Merolla (London: Lexington Books, 2005), pp.177-187 (p.178)

<sup>3</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 192-193

<sup>4</sup> Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?’ in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 191-211 (p.196)

<sup>5</sup> Stacy Alaimo, ‘Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature’, in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp.237–264 (p.238)

<sup>6</sup> Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.10

## **Mila Younes' *Nomade***

I have chosen to focus on Mila Younes' autobiography, *Nomade* (2008) to examine the ways in which it mobilises the author's memories of her ancestral 'home' in Algeria to develop a consciousness of self as a form of resistance against the colonial spoilation and exploitation of the earth. By tracing the narrator's process of 'settling down' in Canada, the objective is to understand the modalities through which the referentiality of 'home' is problematized and its heterogeneity and transformability emphasized, particularly with regards to women's relationship with constructions of 'home' as community and environment.

Mila Younes is part of a generation of Canadian women writers of Algerian descent who have in the past few decades produced complex understandings of the interplay between identity, gender and culture in the form of political essays<sup>7</sup>, fiction<sup>8</sup>, poetry<sup>9</sup> and autobiography<sup>10</sup>. This literature is characterized by a particular concern for reinterpreting the 'homeland' and its legacy of anti-colonial resistance through memories of the Algerian war for independence from French rule, as well as a preoccupation for the central question of women's liberation within the dynamics of (post)colonialism, nationalism, multiculturalism and transnationalism. Mila Younes is an interesting case since her history involves a complex set of migrations across many different 'homes': her native France where she feels 'exiled' as the daughter of Algerian immigrants<sup>11</sup>, her parents' native Algeria that continues to act as an important cultural reference through perpetuated traditional customs, and her new 'home', Canada. Her two autobiographical volumes: *Ma mère, ma fille, ma soeur*<sup>12</sup> (2003) and its sequel, *Nomade* (2008) trace this complex history. Younes' first autobiographical volume depicts her struggle as an adolescent and young adult in Paris in an Algerian immigrant community against the background of patriarchal family structures reinforced by the context of migration and the experience of racism. The second volume, *Nomade* describes her life in Canada and is divided into two sections: 'East Coast' where she describes her arrival in Quebec and the beginning of her new life in Canada with the

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the political writings of Djemila Benhabib and Zehira Houfani.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the novels of Nadia Ghalem, Nassira Belloula and Katia Belkhodja.

<sup>9</sup> Nadia Ghalem and Ouanessa Younsi are both known for their poetry.

<sup>10</sup> The two texts in the present study fall into this category.

<sup>11</sup> In spite of having spent twenty-five years of her life in France, Mila Younes was never granted French nationality as the result of the French nationality law at the time of her birth in 1953.

<sup>12</sup> 'My mother, My Daughter, My Sister'.

birth of her daughter, and 'West Coast' set in the Vancouver region where Younes moved in the 1980s. In the second part, the narrator relates her difficulties as a new immigrant and single mother learning to survive in an English-speaking environment with a basic knowledge of the language. After separating from her daughter's father, she moves to Salt Spring Island off the coast of Vancouver where she becomes part of a community of women environmentalists with a common project of 'empowerment' in defence of the earth, women's rights and the rights of indigenous people. Her 'adoptive island', as she calls it, provides the setting for her transformational journey. The cabin where she lives with her daughter surrounded by giant trees, the Pacific Ocean and the mountains becomes her 'home' for a while. It is on this island that the narrator engages with the defence of the land and the rights of those who have been dispossessed of it. In the latter section of *Nomade* the narrator describes her participation in environmental activism as she joins a local protest movement against the logging companies' practice of clearcutting. She also describes her involvement in an indigenous-led protest against a road project cutting into native territory. Her friendships with local activists and the police brutality that she bears witness to during the protest are important turning points in shaping her consciousness of her new adoptive country.

### **'Homing' on Salt Spring Island**

Mila Younes tells her story by resorting to an eclectic juxtaposition of events narrated in the historic past tense, conversations in direct speech, recollections of previous events, encounters with people, mixed with self-reflections, meditations, and dreams. Although the overall structure of the narrative is linear – from the 'East Coast' to the 'West Coast' – the narration includes frequent analepses that allow the 'narrating I' to re-interpret the experiences of the 'narrated I' in the light of previous experiences, encounters, conversations, and readings.<sup>13</sup> This strategy allows a critical perspective to emerge from the text, as the narrator draws a series of parallels between her new environment and her ancestral Algerian 'home'. More particularly, her observations of Canadian indigenous customs in the second part of *Nomade* lead her to reflect on their similarities with her ancestral Berber culture, particularly with regards to the importance of the

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<sup>13</sup> I am using Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's useful distinction between the 'narrating I' and the 'narrated I' amongst many other components that make up the speaking/writing 'I' in autobiographical writing.

earth and the natural world, while the indigenous protest she takes part in brings back memories of her father's arrest during the Algerian war. Her initiation into indigenous Shamanistic rites and a visit she makes to a traditional *Sweat Lodge* bring her closer, not just to Canadian indigenous culture, but closer to her desire for her own Berber 'home'. As she enters a mystical and spiritual journey into self-consciousness, she remembers a visit to a Berber traditional healer she made once with her mother during her first visit to Algeria. This section of the book is characterised by the presence of the narrator's mother who appears in her dreams and who is symbolically associated to the dominant motives of the earth and the island. Significantly, the narrator's spiritual journey also corresponds to her artistic awakening as she starts painting and taking part in art exhibitions. Her spiritual awakening is described in parallel with her emerging political consciousness as she draws frequent parallels between the indigenous people's resistance to protect their environment and the Algerians' resistance against French colonial rule. Thus, one is inclined to read the quest for a 'home' in *Nomade*, not as a mere nostalgic longing for an irretrievable place, but as an attempt to create a mental space to understand the present, create art and reinterpret one's relationship with the environment.

'Home' thus emerges as a transitional space linked to creativity and self-knowledge, a kind of 'green world' where the narrator can retreat from the pressures of the social and patriarchal structures of the world around her.<sup>14</sup> This mythical and spiritual 'return home' might at times suggest an idealisation process reminiscent of colonial representations of the 'noble other' and its 'natural' connection to the earth. In a paradoxical way, Younes mobilises what might appear as essentialistic representations of both Canadian indigenous culture and traditional Berber culture, in order to re-imagine 'home'. Her method is to some extent similar to the one employed in contemporary Canadian women's writing that seeks to establish connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature.<sup>15</sup> It is significantly on the womb-like island of Salt Spring that she also calls the 'women's island' that the narrator builds solidarities with other women and develops a political consciousness which is largely positioned in continuity with her own history. This new 'home' allows the narrator to position herself politically within her new Canadian context. In this respect, Younes' imaginings of home point to both its fixed,

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<sup>14</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1981)

<sup>15</sup> An example is Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972)

mythical and at times essentialistic dimension as well as its fluid dimension and potential for change – what Brah called the ‘creative tension’ between ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’ - deployed in *Nomade* as a strategy to engage with present-day dynamics of cultural and political transformation.

This brief discussion of Mila Younes’ *Nomade*, points to the complex ways in which the discourse of fixed origins and the fluidity of ‘home’ in migrant writing are representationally embedded into each other, and how this connection allows writers to transgress the linearity of time and space to explore the notion of ‘home’ as a transformative mental space. The narrator’s description of Canadian indigenous rituals interspersed with her memories of Berber traditional culture, both articulated as a nostalgic desire for a lost ‘home’, could be read at times as a nativist desire to return to pre-colonial indigenous cultural practices. However, at the same time, this essentialised, at times nostalgic, desire for ‘home’ also allows the narrator to develop a political consciousness and a voice that integrate the histories of oppression and resistance while engaging with the pressing issues in present-day Canada, namely the defence of indigenous rights, women’s rights and the protection of the environment. In this respect, the longing for ‘home’ that traverses Younes’ autobiographical narrative is not merely the expression of loss and nostalgia, but rather an attempt to erase the boundary between the past and the present, the fixed and the fluid, the natural and the social in order to engage with the responsibility for a shared environment.

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