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Peripheral Orientalism and the Creation of Arab Literary Precursors
in *Quinteto de Mogador* by Alberto Ruy Sánchez

Ignacio López-Calvo¹

Abstract

This essay explores the *intentiono operis* in the use of transatlantic bridges that are sometimes real, other times rhetorical, and others imaginary that Alberto Ruy Sánchez draws between his country and Morocco. It also looks at the representation of Moroccan space and women, arguing that Ruy Sánchez falls into exoticizing Orientalism with tints of colonial nostalgia, particularly when portraying Moroccan women. Finally, it explores how the author creates his own precursors through

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the quotes and literary references in his five novels. Presenting himself as a reader of Arab erotic literature and Sufi sacred texts, Ruy Sánchez suggests that he is rewriting classic literary texts, thus creating his own literary lineage and diachronically situating his work within a literary tradition that remains on the margins of Mexican national coordinates to approach, instead, the canon of Arabic literature.

KEYWORDS: Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Quinteto de Mogador*, Peripheral Orientalism, Arab literary precursors, Transatlantic bridges, Libidization.

This essay explores the *intentio operis* in the use of transatlantic bridges that are sometimes real, other times rhetorical, and others imaginary (the books in a Mogador library that make butterflies migrate from Canada to Mexico) that the Mexican poet and novelist Alberto Ruy Sánchez (1951-) draws between his country and Morocco. It also looks at the representation of Moroccan space and women that appears in his *Quinteto de Mogador* (Mogador Quintet, 2014). As José Sánchez Carbó explains when referring to *Cuentos de Mogador* by Ruy Sánchez, “the city of Mogador sometimes plays a leading role, while others, its environment determines many of the actions.”² In the same way, it could be argued that the true protagonist of *Quinteto de Mogador*’s novels is none other than the city itself. A metaphor for desire, the port city of Mogador, which today bears the name of Essaouira,³ is also turned, through a lyrical prosopopoeia, into an inaccessible and

² “La ciudad de Mogador a veces cumple un papel protagónico y en otras su ambiente determina muchas de las acciones” (205).

³ Spelled “Essaouira” [35] in the quintet. Its medina is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site since 2001.

libidinized woman who is to be conquered. In this city we find the characters that Ruy Sánchez calls “Sleepwalkers” (Sonámbulos), who recognize themselves and others like them in sexual desire. Through intertextualities with the mysticism of sacred Sufi texts from Al-Andalus and the Arabic world in general, erotic desire is connected with the sacred, metaphysical, and transcendental desire of the mystics, who yearn, in their sui generis form of desire, to unite their own soul to the of the divinity. The author himself provides clues about this approach in an interview with Patricio de Icaza: “Over time, I have realized that I live literature in a way that for some is strange: as a kind of mystical vocation—a heretical mysticism in which the beloved woman is a kind of goddess.”⁴

In this connection between the beloved woman as a reflection of the divinity and the divinity itself, there are echoes of medieval Europe’s courtly love aesthetics, which fuse the erotic and the spiritual. Relatedly, Ruy Sánchez has stated that he was influenced by the Jesuit idea that “God can be reached through forms, through the senses, through beauty.”⁵ However, though courtly love is briefly mentioned in the quintet, the author strategically locates his work instead in the Arabic erotic literary tradition, marked by platonic and mystical conceptions of love. Therefore, his quintet would be nothing but the continuation and *aggiornamento* of this literary and mystical tradition. The result is a type of lyrical, engaging prose that unproblematically mixes fiction and non-fiction, as well as novel, poetry, and essay.

⁴ “Con el tiempo me he dado cuenta de que vivo la literatura de una manera que para algunos es extraña: como una especie de vocación mística—una mística herética en la cual la mujer amada es una especie de diosa” (s.p.).

⁵ “Se puede llegar a Dios a través de las formas, de los sentidos, de la belleza” (Ávila s.p.).

As historian Jeffrey Lesser explains, “Real and imagined geography is critical to the construction of ethnic identity” (2007, xxv). In this regard, we find examples in *Tristes tropiques*, where Lévi-Strauss is intrigued by the Japanese ethnic minority’s early attempts to justify its belonging to the Brazilian national project when, through archaeological studies, the immigrants tried to connect Brazilian indigenous tribes with ancient Japanese populations (109). Chinese and Japanese immigrants have made similar attempts to link the history, culture, and ethnic origins of their nations to indigenous Peruvian populations, as I have explained elsewhere. And Jewish immigrants in Argentina did likewise when writing literary texts such as Alberto Gerchunoff’s *Los gauchos judíos* (Jewish Gauchos, 1919), where, as Marcos Aguinis reminds us, they presented themselves as “more Hispanic than the descendants of Spaniards and were even responsible for the invention of Castilian.”⁶ Something similar happens in Ruy Sánchez’s *Quinteto de Mogador*, with the difference that in this case neither the author nor his nation seems to gain anything in particular by establishing these real, rhetorical, and imaginary bridges between Mexican and Moroccan ethnicities. Next, I will explore the various rhetorical, transatlantic bridges in the Global South drawn by Ruy Sánchez, as well as the creation of literary predecessors to insert *Quinteto de Mogador* into an Arab literary tradition.

First, the first-person narrator who opens the quintet in the novel *Nueve veces el asombro* (Nine Times the Wonder) claims to be the son and grandson of nomadic indigenous people from Sonora, Mexico. Later, in the third novel, titled *En los labios del agua* (On the Lips of Water), the same first-person narrator, Juan Amado (whose real name is Al Gazali), adds an Arab origin to the Sonoran heritage. And in *La mano del fuego* (Fire’s Hand), which closes the quintet, we are

⁶ “Más hispánicos que los descendientes de españoles y hasta responsables de la invención del castellano” (59).

told that his grandfather Jamal Al Gosaibi had emigrated from Morocco to Mexico, where he had adopted the name of Juan Amado González.

Beyond this blood heritage, at one point, we are told in the novel *En los labios del agua* that Mexico is, in fact, an Arab country: “You belong here as much as to the place where you were born. Mexico is a complicated braid of other nations, of a thousand peoples, of a thousand scattered castes in its rarefied winds. It is a hotbed of races. Of minorities, as they like to say now. It is more Arabic than Spanish. Mexico is an Arab country that does not know itself.”⁷ Indeed, Ruy Sánchez has declared in several interviews that he tries to rescue Arab heritage as a hidden presence in today’s Mexico. Thus, in his interview with Ángel Gurría Quintana, the author describes the surprising similarities that he finds between the two countries, from the mountains and geographical semi-aridity to the physical resemblance of the people, which, according to him, is due to a Spanish Arab heritage (rather than to miscegenation with indigenous people in Latin America) that turns Mexicans into “far-off Andalusians.” He is likewise convinced that Mexicans’ excessive courtesy and double intentions have more to do with the Arab than with the Castilian character. Ruy Sánchez also sees similarities in the crafts of both countries, particularly in Talavera ceramics from Puebla and textiles from Oaxaca and Chiapas. In an interview, he reveals the origin of his passion for these parallels: traveling from Europe, he once rediscovered his own country in the twin culture of Morocco.⁸

⁷ “Pertenece aquí tanto como al lugar donde naciste. México es una trenza complicada de otras naciones, de mil pueblos, de mil castas dispersas en sus vientos enrarecidos. Es un hervidero de razas. De minorías, como les gusta decir ahora. Es más árabe que español. México es un país árabe que se desconoce” (317).

⁸ One could further add the tradition of moros y cristianos. Moreover, Fermín Reygadas Dahl, in his forthcoming book *La montura vaquera y la cuera, ajuar del vaquero sudcaliforniano. Registro de una*

There are also geographical bonds: the narrator of *Nueve veces el asombro* was born in Sonora and died in Mogador, thus uniting in his person the two deserts on both sides of the Atlantic. In the same novel, the vegetation of Mexico and Morocco is blended when we learn about “a special type of oil: the one obtained from the fruit of the argan. A tree that grows at the entrance to the Sahara. . . It is a distant relative of the huisache and the mesquite that populate the deserts of northern Mexico in their own way.”⁹ And in *La mano del fuego*, we read: “I was a little over three years old when we went to live in the desert, in northwestern Mexico in the southern part of Baja California. . . Involuntary memory made me recover Mexico in Morocco.”¹⁰ In short, the North African desert’s positive overtones lead the narrator to recall a long-forgotten, idyllic childhood in the Baja California desert.

In addition, linguistic ties are established: in several of the novels, the Arabic roots of Spanish words such as *azulejo* (tile), *azafrán* (saffron), or *aceite* (oil) end up twinning both countries. In the same vein, in *La mano del fuego* a librarian condemns Antonio de Nebrija’s error in eliminating words of Arabic origin from his 1492 dictionary: “But his attempt was also a great inquisition of words. A tremendous racial cleansing that, in many cases, as in this one of *asombro* [astonishment], impoverished the Spanish language. Nebrija expelled from the language all words that were of Arabic origin, provided that they had an equivalent of Latin origin. And

tradición viva, provides further evidence of this Arab heritage in Mexico.

⁹ “Un tipo especial de aceite: el que se obtiene del fruto del argano. Un árbol que crece a la entrada del Sáhara . . . Es pariente lejano del huizache y del mezquite que pueblan a su manera los desiertos del norte de México” (23).

¹⁰ “Yo tendría algo más de tres años cuando fuimos a vivir al desierto, en el noroeste de México en la parte sur de la Baja California . . . La memoria involuntaria me hizo recuperar a México en Marruecos” (560-61).

even so, there are still more than four thousand words that come to us from Arabic.”¹¹ In other words, the epistemicidal attempt not only failed, but Arabic words ended up being exported to Mexico and the rest of Latin America.

Other bridges refer the reader to gardening. In *Los jardines secretos de Mogador* (*The Secret Gardens of Mogador*), the eroticized gardens (called *riyads* in the novel even though, in reality, a *riyad* is a traditional Moroccan house built around a garden) are sometimes metaphors of an inaccessible woman, while others they represent the desert or a kind of world map. We read, for example: “Entering that part of you that others cannot conceive exists because they do not know the depth and powers of your inner gardens.”¹² This association of women with nature throughout the five novels can become problematic at times, since, as María José Guerra Palmero explains, “The historical complex of Modernity was sustained by the submission of nature and women. Everything that was destined to be dominated, including the people of colonized lands or the popular classes, was naturalized—it was understood as primitive and crude—or it was feminized. Naturalization and feminization, the two sides of the same coin, served as an ideological strategy to subordinate and justify submission.”¹³ At one point, a new transatlantic

¹¹ “Pero su intento fue también una gran inquisición de las palabras. Una limpia racial tremenda que, en muchos casos, como en este del ‘asombro’ empobreció al español. Nebrija expulsó de la lengua todas las palabras que fuera de origen árabe siempre y cuando tuvieran un equivalente de origen latino. Y aun así quedan hoy más de cuatro mil palabras que nos vienen del árabe” (570)

¹² “Entrar a eso en ti que los otros no pueden concebir que exista porque no conocen la profundidad y los poderes de tus jardines internos” (458)

¹³ “El complejo histórico de la Modernidad quedó sostenido por la sumisión de la naturaleza y las mujeres. Todo aquello que se destinaba a ser dominado, entre ellos los pueblos de tierras colonizadas o las clases populares, se naturalizaba—se entendía como primitivo y tosco—o se feminizaba. Naturalización y

link appears when some Mexican gardeners propose to create Moroccan *chinampas*: “Mexican specialists decided to make extremely fertile floating islands on the sea and even inside the walls, connected by canals. They would flood the city and then dry it up at each change of government.”¹⁴ Later, we learn that a Canadian writer based in Mogador spent a quarter of a century collecting Mexican cacti (this passage is based on a real-life garden) to make the Moroccan city “return to that landscape more faithful to itself.”¹⁵ By recognizing its proximity to the desert, the adoption of Mexican cacti would make Mogador a more authentically Maghrebian city. The narrator himself echoes the paradox: “But it is strange to decide to make Mogador more faithful to itself by taking a piece of Mexican nature to the heart of its land. The desert deepens the desert, said Scott.”¹⁶ These cacti, which he compares to Mexican axolotls (439), find happiness in Mogador because they feel at home there as well.

Of all the bridges drawn by Ruy Sánchez, the most notable is the one that finds a genealogy between Mexico and Morocco through literature. In a passage from *La mano del fuego* we are told about a librarian from Mogador who loves Mexican poetry and is familiar with authors like Octavio Paz, Coral Bracho, David Huerta, and José Gorostiza, among others. But the main literary connection moves in a different direction: to use the vocabulary suggested by Jorge

feminización, las dos caras de la misma moneda, servían de estrategia ideológica para subordinar y justificar la sumisión” (27).

¹⁴ “Los especialistas mexicanos decidieron hacer sobre el mar y hasta adentro de las murallas unas islas flotantes, sumamente fértiles, comunicadas por canales. Inundarían la ciudad y luego la secarían en cada cambio de gobierno” (436).

¹⁵ “Volver a ese paisaje más fiel a sí mismo” (438).

¹⁶ “Pero es curioso que se decida hacer a Mogador más fiel a sí misma llevando al corazón de su tierra una parte de la naturaleza mexicana. El desierto profundiza al desierto, decía Scott” (438).

Luis Borges in his essays “Kafka y sus precursors” (“Kafka and his precursors” 1951; included in *Otras inquisiciones* [*Other inquisitions*, 1958]) and “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (“The Argentine writer and tradition,” 1951), the author of *Quinteto de Mogador* creates his own precursors through the quotes and literary references in his five novels. In other words, now presenting himself as a reader, Ruy Sánchez suggests that he is rewriting classic literary texts, thus creating his own literary lineage and diachronically situating his work within a literary tradition that remains on the margins of Mexican national coordinates to approach, instead, the canon of Arabic literature. Besides the centrality of and intertextualities with *One Thousand and One Nights* and a sequel titled *The New Nights of Shakjrazad*¹⁷ (perhaps referring to *The Supplemental Nights to the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1886—1888), the protagonist of *Los jardines secretos de Mogador*, like the king of *The New Nights of Shakjrazad*, is, in fact, turned into a male Scheherazade who must find and envision stories about the gardens of Mogador if he wants to have access to his beloved’s bed.

Although Ruy Sánchez suggests parallels with other works such as the *Kama Sutra*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and the *Decameron*, the true literary kinship that he seeks for his quintet is with what his narrator calls the Arabic Kama Sutras. These include, above all, the treatise on love *El collar de la paloma* (*The Ring of the Dove* or *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah* 1022) by Ibn Hazm, but also others such as *La ley de Jamsa* (*The Law of Jamsa*) by the same author, the fifteenth-century Arabic sex manual and work of erotic literature *El jardín perfumado* (*The Perfumed Garden*) by Muhamed al-Nefzawi, *La guía del amante alerta* (*The Alert Lover’s Guide*) by Ibn Foulaita, the *Tratado del amor* (*Treatise on Love*) and the collection of mystical odes *El intérprete de los deseos* (*Interpreter of Desires* or *Tarjumán Al-Ashwáq*; 1215) by Ibn Arabí (Murcia, 1165-

¹⁷ There is talk, for example, of genies (*djin*, 406).

Damascus, 1240), and the poem *La conferencia de los pájaros* (*The Conference of the Birds*) by the Persian Sufi poet Farid Ud-Din Attar. Through recurrent references to these works, the *Quinteto de Mogador* is strategically framed within the tradition of Arab-Andalusian erotic literature and Arabic erotic literature in general, as well as within that of Sufi sacred literature, in which, more than to eroticism, love and sexuality lead to metaphysical dimensions directly connected to the divine. There are also parallels between the format of the Mogador quintet and Ruy Sánchez's description of "the Arab Kama Sutras" in the entry "Qué es la jansa o mano de Fatma" (What is the jansa or hand of Fatma) on his blog "Cuaderno abierto como un cuerpo" (Open Notebook like a Body): "A jansa is frequently painted over the Arabic Kama Sutras (such as Nefzawi's *The Perfumed Garden*, Ibn Hazm's *The Ring of the Dove*, Ibn Foulaita's *The Alert Lover's Guide*, or the *Treatise on Love* and *Interpreter of Desires* by Ibn Arabí), those manuals that are simultaneously poem, narration, and essay and that help us to live."¹⁸

In other paragraphs of the quintet, Ruy Sánchez also clarifies to which literary traditions his alter ego narrator's literature does not belong, distancing himself several times from both erotic literature and magical realism. For example, in *La mano del fuego* we read the following description of some goats climbing on argans, a type of tree on the outskirts of Mogador: "The unexpectedness of the scene fascinated us. And it was real too. It was not the easy invention of one more of the imitators of magical realism."¹⁹ And later, the same idea resurfaces: "I hated, for example, novels and stories where writers include unnecessary flying nuns or similar tricks to

¹⁸ "Una jansa se pinta con frecuencia sobre los Kama Sutras árabes (como *El jardín perfumado* de Nefzawi, *El collar de la paloma* de Ibn Hazm, *La guía del amante alerta* de Ibn Foulaita, o el *Tratado del amor* y *El intérprete de los deseos* de Ibn Arabí) esos manuales que son poema, narración y ensayo al mismo tiempo y que nos ayudan a vivir" (s.p.).

easily impress their readers. . . He said that magic is in our gaze when it knows how to decipher the surprising and exceptional in what for others is just everyday life, even monotony.”²⁰

As to his distancing his writing from erotic literature, the narrative voice in *La mano del fuego* complains: “Perhaps that is why I have always had a certain revulsion for the books that are placed in bookstores in a section called ‘erotic literature.’ And I hate being classified on that list.”²¹ A few pages later, in an exercise of literary (self-)analysis, the reason for this rejection is clarified: “At that time, I had the impression that a good part of what is known as erotic literature is simply an external description of the act of love. And that’s why it’s full of stereotypes. It never considers the delirium that is inseparable from making love. And if the internal life of the love encounter is forgotten, only an impoverished external image remains.”²² Instead of with erotic literature, therefore, Ruy Sánchez affiliates his narrative with Arab treatises on love, which,

¹⁹ “Lo inesperado de la escena nos tenía fascinados. Y además era real. No era la invención fácil de uno más de los imitadores del realismo mágico” (564).

²⁰ “Detestaba, por ejemplo, las novelas y los cuentos donde los escritores ponen innecesarias monjas que vuelan o trucos similares para impresionar fácilmente a sus lectores . . . Decía que la magia está en nuestra mirada cuando sabe descifrar lo sorprendente y excepcional en aquello que para otros es sólo vida cotidiana, incluso monótona” (651).

²¹ “Por eso tal vez siempre he tenido cierta repulsión por los libros que en las librerías colocan en una sección que se llama ‘literatura erótica’. Y detesto que me clasifiquen en esa lista” (582).

²² “En esa época yo tenía la impresión de que una buena parte de lo que se conoce como literatura erótica es simplemente descripción externa del acto amoroso. Y por eso está llena de estereotipos. Nunca toma en cuenta la parte de delirio que es indisoluble a hacer el amor. Y si la vida interna del encuentro amoroso se olvida sólo queda una imagen externa empobrecida” (593).

according to the narrator, are, unlike the Indian *Kama Sutra*, “more poetic choreography than a list of positions. But they are equally a method to reach God through the paths of sex”²³ (635).

Curiously, the creation of a genealogy of ancestors and literary precursors carried out by the implicit author of *Quinteto de Mogador* does not coincide with the list of writers who have most influenced the real author, according to his interview with Patricio de Icaza. In fact, of all the names listed there, only Ibn Hazm reappears among those that shape his literary ancestry in *Quinteto de Mogador*. This reflects a conscious or unconscious desire to fabricate his own literary tradition in his work, regardless of the true literary influences in real life.

In the last pages of the book, the author, in a somewhat defensive but, in my opinion, unconvincing way, declares that his book lacks orientalist or exotic traits because, according to him, Mexicans feel at home in Morocco and vice versa, and furthermore it is a South-South relationship (as if noxious South-South Orientalisms did not exist). Despite the author’s unquestionable good intentions, the aforementioned transatlantic bridges that link the Mexican and Moroccan nations are not entirely innocent if we pay attention to the nuances that dot the work in what I would call benevolent, peripheral Orientalism. From the outset, it should be noted that, though it is not difficult to appreciate an Orientalist approach that exoticizes Morocco and libidinizes Moroccan women, there is no apparent intention of establishing the imperialist system of domination and demonization pointed out by Edward Said in his foundational book *Orientalism*, in his critique of European colonialism in the Levant. *Quinteto de Mogador* would fit, rather, in the line of Hispanic Orientalism that Julia Kushigian analyzes in her study

²³ “Más coreografías poéticas que lista de posiciones. Pero son igualmente un método para llegar a Dios por los caminos del sexo” (635).

Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition. In Dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy (1991).

In this context, we find an obvious fascination with the *hammam*, which in the quintet becomes a space for mysterious encounters. From the Arab public bath in which people take care of their hygiene and rest, in addition to functioning as a meeting place for social gatherings and discussions of all kinds, including political ones, in Ruy Sánchez's work, the *hammam* (there seems to be only one in Mogador) takes on an almost mystical character, as it is even more mysterious than the rest of the city of Mogador, with its remote origins. We are informed, for example, that "the desire in the eyes of women (when they come out very relaxed from the public bath, from the *hammam*) is similar to the brightness of the moon."²⁴

This sexualization of Moroccan women can become problematic at times, as is the case of the photo of a complete nude in black and white on page 380 of the Alfaguara edition, which could be one of the orientalist postcards that used to be made during the French protectorate in Algeria. Malek Alloula criticizes, in *The Colonial Harem* (1986), precisely the voyeuristic, colonial gaze that characterizes these postcard photographs, full of purported harems, concubines, and slaves, produced by the French during the first three decades of the twentieth century. As Alloula points out, this fetishistic use of models in traditional costumes and in exotic rituals (sometimes prostitutes would be paid to serve as models) in recreating the forbidden world (for Western men) of the harem vulgarly stereotypes and distorts Algerian reality: "Offered up, body and soul, these *algériennes* are the metaphorical equivalent of trophies, of war booty . . . These raided bodies are the spoils of victory, the warrior's reward" (122). As Barbara Harlow

²⁴ "Que el deseo en los ojos de las mujeres (cuando salen muy relajadas del baño público, del *hammam*) es parecido al brillo de la luna" (77).

points out in the introduction to the book, “The postcards, in the context of *The Colonial Harem*, no longer represent Algeria and the Algerian woman but rather the Frenchman's phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem” (XIV).²⁵

In a way, Ruy Sánchez's quintet does evoke a certain colonial nostalgia in its replication of this colonialist, pseudo-ethnographic, and semi-pornographic appropriation of the Orientalized and exoticized Maghrebian woman's body. Camouflaging a veiled desire to possess her, she is supposed to be symbolically “rescued” from the oppressive symbols of the veil and the harem. In *Los jardines secretos de Mogador*, precisely this same correlation between photographic portraiture and symbolic possession is invoked when Jassiba allows the narrator, her lover Ignacio Labrador Zaydún, to make a copy of a photo of her homonymous grandmother (supposedly the nude that appears on the previous page), conceding: “—Okay—Jassiba told me, smiling—, so you are going to have me without having me. I will be a ghost living in my grandmother's body. And you can only invoke it” (382).²⁶

Similarly, the ambivalent fascination with the Moroccan woman's veil as a concomitant obstacle and temptation is apparent in the following passage from *En los labios del agua* (On the Lips of Water): “And the same thing, but multiplied by a thousand, I had felt in Morocco in the powerful look of veiled women, who can say everything, even very explicit obscenities with their eyes. In the streets of Morocco, women grope men with their eyes.”²⁷ The aforementioned harems also appear in the pages of the quintet, as in the passage from *En los ojos del agua* in

²⁵ Ironically, it could be argued that by reproducing the photos in Alloula's book, a new act of violence is perpetrated against the victims.

²⁶ “—Está bien—me dijo Jassiba sonriendo—, así me vas a tener sin tenerme. Seré un fantasma viviendo en el cuerpo de mi abuela. Y sólo podrás invocarlo” (382).

which the narrator learns that his great-great-grandfather Jamal would take revenge on the emir by seducing the women of his harem.

As mentioned, in the quintet Mogador becomes an allegory for the author's frustrating feeling of inaccessibility toward women in general and Moroccan women in particular. And just as it is difficult for him to reach the bottom of the female heart, the Muslim culture of Morocco is equally inaccessible, no matter how much he tries to lyrically grasp it through his literature. For this reason, on several occasions he equates the Moroccan city with the geography of desire for an inaccessible woman, who escapes him like water through her fingers. Later, referring to the writings of the Sufi mystic Aziz Al Gazali, the narrator states that "He drew a parallel between Mogador and a woman. He entered them, the poetry, but deep down, they were always radically inaccessible to him. He seemed to affirm, like a good Sufi teacher, that he never stops possessing someone, especially women and cities."²⁸ Therefore, through this allegory that percolates the five novels, Mogador is described as the city of desire in a quintet that becomes an exploratory lucubration of sexual desire and women's passion in particular.

This exoticizing and Orientalist approach has an obvious literary source: in a wink to the reader, Ruy Sánchez establishes intertextualities with the medieval collection of traditional tales from the Levant *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is directly mentioned in the novels. The

²⁷ "Y lo mismo, pero multiplicado por mil, había sentido en Marruecos con la mirada poderosa de las mujeres veladas, que todo, incluso muy explícitas obscenidades pueden decir claramente con los ojos. En las calles de Marruecos las mujeres manosean a los hombres con los ojos" (265).

²⁸ "Hacía un paralelo entre Mogador y una mujer. Entraba en ellas, las poesía, pero en el fondo siempre le eran radicalmente inaccesibles. Parecía afirmar, como buen maestro sufí, que nunca se termina de poseer a alguien, especialmente a las mujeres y a las ciudades" (333).

result of such a narrative approach is, in my opinion, a romanticization and stylistic idealization of everything Moroccan, including, of course, Moroccan women. But this is nothing new in literature. In an interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy, who had a similar approach in several of his novels with Asian characters, recognized the inevitable deficiencies that afflict Westerners when dealing with Asian cultures (318-19).²⁹ The same, I believe, could be said of Ruy Sánchez's attempt to penetrate Moroccan culture: aware of his epistemological shortcomings, rather than representing it realistically, he limits himself to lyrically and oneirically envisioning it, barely hiding the melancholy that his inability to fully understand that exotic (for him) world produces—hence the culture shock suffered by the narrator of *La mano del fuego*, the author's alter ego, in the scene with the goats climbing a tree. This inaccessibility of Moroccan culture for a Westerner is identified with what the author calls, in his interview with Patricio de Icaza, “that great mystery that for men is women's desire.”³⁰ Then, in his interview with Ávila he insists: “—I think it all started as a concern: verifying at the beginning of my life with my partner that I was a typical Mexican macho and that I had a lot to

²⁹ “Pero no se trata de una India transcendental, metafísica o profunda, sino al contrario, una exaltación de la superficie y yo diría hasta de la pacotilla India. Yo creo, y me hubiera gustado que Octavio Paz estuviera de acuerdo—pienso que lo está—que la única descodificación que podemos hacer en tanto que occidentales, que la única lectura no neurótica de la India que nos es posible a partir de nuestro logocentrismo es ésa que privilegia su superficie. El resto es traducción cristianizante, sincretismo, verdadera superficialidad” (Rodríguez Monegal 318-19; citado por Julia A. Kushigian).

³⁰ “Ese gran misterio que para los hombres es el deseo de las mujeres” (s.p.).

learn about the affective, amorous, and sexual world of a woman.”³¹ The Mogador quintet is, as a result, the answer to the author’s exploration of female desire and erotic desire in general.

In short, there is no doubt that even though he denies it in the book’s “Coda,” at times Ruy Sánchez falls into exoticizing Orientalism with tints of colonial nostalgia, particularly when portraying Moroccan women. But it is also true that the quintet offers beautiful prose marked by its evocative lyricism, which reaches its peak in some of the poems included in the novels, such as the beautiful first one of the quintet, “Un beso es un eco que retumba” (A kiss is an echo that rumbles). The same praise can be made of other passages in which erotic lyricism appears in the form of poetic prose, as we see in the third book of the quintet, *En los labios del agua*: “You enter my chest with yours: your skin protests making whirlpools. On the lowest shore of my belly, your hips leave, again and again, the most violent curve of your waves: you bathe my beaches, hit them, and devour them. Your foam and mine mingle, like my lips and yours.”³² And, of course, above all these aesthetic achievements, we also have his laudable attempt to genealogically twin, through literature and rhetoric, his country with Morocco.

³¹ “—Creo que todo comenzó como una preocupación: comprobar al principio de mi vida en pareja que yo era un típico macho mexicano y que tenía mucho que aprender sobre el mundo afectivo, amoroso y sexual de una mujer” (s.p.).

³² “Entras en mi pecho con el tuyo: la piel protesta haciendo remolinos. En la orilla más baja de mi vientre tus caderas dejan, una y otra vez, la curva más violenta de tus olas: bañas mis playas, las golpeas y las devoras. Tu espuma y la mía se mezclan, como mis labios y los tuyos” (235-36).

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