TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITERRANEAN RESISTANCE: THE SAHRAWI WOMEN'S STRUGGLE

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Abstract

This communication aims to explore the cultural complexity of the Mediterranean region not so much from a geopolitical perspective, but rather as an open and metaphysically conceived cultural space. This perspective is analyzed through the political and social experience of Sahrawi women in Western Sahara, who have played a leading role in building and administering a democracy founded on steadfast and radical resistance. Firstly, it will emerge how the absence of patriarchal logics has created favorable conditions for this political experience, which took shape with the establishment of the *Union nationale des femmes sahraouies* (UNFS). Secondly, the core principles of this movement will be linked to key aspects of feminist theories that enrich the Mediterranean and global debate, particularly Islamic feminism (Fatima Mernissi et Asma Lamrabet), Ecofeminism (Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies), and Decolonial feminism (drawing from Françoise Vergès' work). Such a comparison allows for a rethinking of concepts such as tradition, no longer as a synonym for immobility, and for a reconsideration of the Mediterranean space in light of cultural intersections and anti-colonial resistances, freeing it from a patriarchal, Eurocentric, and Islamophobic vision.

Keywords: Sahrawi women, feminism, gendered resistance, emancipation, Western Sahara

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Unfolding the Margins: The Mediterranean as a Critical Space

The most fruitful Braudelian legacy in the study of the Mediterranean space lies in the critiques it has provoked. It is, in fact, in response to that approach—totalizing and stretched across the *longue durée*—that reflections have emerged capable of interrogating the very epistemology of Mediterranean history, freeing it from unitary, Eurocentric, and unilateral visions. The Mediterranean is thus reinterpreted through the lens of its discontinuity and plurality, rejecting any ideological form of historical regionalization.[2] In line with the radical rereading offered by Iain Chambers, the Mediterranean we begin from is a "critical space, a site of interrogations and unsuspected maps of meaning,"[3] a narrative device told through marginalized voices, like those of the Sahrawi people. This article, by focusing on a social minority such as the Sahrawi people, also serves as a critique of the ways in which knowledge is preserved and transmitted. Crucial, in this regard, is the reflection of Paul Ricoeur who, in dialogue with postcolonial perspectives, questions how historical memory and narrative are constructed, and who holds the power to tell history. In *Memory, History, Forgetting,*[4] Ricoeur warns against the risk of a historical narrative dominated by official, selective memories that serve the interests of power. In dominant historiography, history tends to be reduced to institutionalized collective memory, without adequately addressing silences, omissions, and absences. Even Braudel, despite the merit of proposing a global reading of the Mediterranean, ends up—according to Ricoeur—flattening the complexity of local conflicts and histories, offering a narrative centered on the European point of view and marginalizing non-Western sources.

2 This ideological dimension has been problematized in the collective volume *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, which offers a systematic critique of the very idea of the Mediterranean as a "natural" category. The borders and regional categories are not given by nature but are the result of political decisions, ideological conflicts, and practices of inclusion and exclusion that have shaped the perception and reality of the region. See William V. Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

3 Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 34; See also *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities,* London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, where Chambers further develops the discourse on interrupted modernity, demonstrating how the Mediterranean, as a critical space, challenges the linear temporality of Western modernity and reveals its internal contradictions.

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

It is, to use Jack Goody's words, a "theft of history"[5]—the kind carried out by certain historical narratives that, while seemingly embracing global perspectives, continue to ignore the role of non-Western societies, reducing the plurality of cultural exchanges to a Eurocentric hegemonic view. The sacrifice of the particular in favor of a universal flattening leaves out the more complex and localized dynamics which, despite their apparent marginality, have been fundamental in shaping the region. Ricoeur's and Goody's studies appear to contribute to the development of a "situated knowledge," a concept that would be further elaborated by Donna Haraway in the context of post-structuralist feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. This concept advocates for knowledge rooted in the partiality and position of the knowing subject, as opposed to the illusion of objective and universal knowledge. It is also particularly interesting to consider these critiques from a methodological standpoint, as they challenge central conceptual pairs—such as abstraction and concreteness, universal and particular—which, if reconfigured in dialectical rather than oppositional terms, offer a way to overcome a binary view of the Mediterranean space.

In recent decades, a significant portion of critical reflection on Mediterranean studies has questioned the dominant approach for its systematic exclusion of female subjectivities, gender relations, and everyday practices, Julia Clancy-Smith,[6] for example, investigates the cross-border movements and experiences of women, workers, and minority religious communities within the Mediterranean and colonial context. Her perspective is heavily influenced by the theoretical approach developed by Joan Wallach Scott,[7] who has emphasized how the category of gender is not merely an analytical tool, but a real epistemological and political structure that shapes historical production, influencing what is remembered, how it is narrated, and who is considered the subject of history. These studies deconstruct the vision of the Mediterranean as a unified and harmonious world, emphasizing the gender and power asymmetries that define the region. They challenge the construction of a masculine and patriarchal Mediterranean, which excludes female voices and marginalized knowledge.

5 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
6 Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans.*
7 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

A Sahrawi Genealogy of Gendered Resistance

The present investigation is part of the broader field of Mediterranean studies, distinguished by a philosophical-speculative approach. Specifically, it follows the research initiated in 2017 by the group *Filosofia in Movimento,*[8] where the Mediterranean is considered a "non-place" in constant flux, animated by a shared critical thought that emerges from the heterogeneous dialectic of cultures inhabiting the basin.[9] The philosophical perspective here is enriched by a gendered reading that positions the Western Sahara as a privileged terrain for investigation. The Sahara, in fact, plays a crucial role in the construction of the Mediterranean space, sharing with it both contradictions and a hybrid character: while it can be seen as a divisive barrier, it also serves as a vital place of transit and cultural bridge. Rethinking the Sahara in this way also entails deconstructing the image of the Mediterranean as a space of conflict and death, an image often perpetuated by populist and fascist political propaganda that fuels anti-migratory and xenophobic ideologies.

In this context, the Sahrawi people emerge as a political and cultural subject that inhabits and redefines this liminal space, transforming it into a place of symbolic elaboration and concrete resistance. The concepts of resistance and anti-colonialism, central to this collective identity, provide a lens through which to rethink not only feminism as a universal value in its heterogeneity and plurality, but also the very concept of the "universal." This is no longer understood as an abstract and totalizing category of Eurocentric origin, but as a movement of thought, open to the coexistence of differences.[10]

8 https://filosofiainmovimento.it/

9 This international research group has devoted several papers to this topic, see in particular: Antonio Cecere, Antonio Coratti, eds., *Lumi sul Mediterraneo: politica, diritto e religione tra le due sponde del Mediterraneo,* Milano: Mimesis Jouvence, 2019; Antonio Cecere, Laura Paulizzi, eds., *Utopia e critica nel Mediterraneo,* Milano: Mimesis Jouvence, 2021; *Giornale di Filosofia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021), *Mediterranean Enlightenment,* https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/giornale-filosofia/issue/view/91.

10 This perspective is in the groove of postcolonial and decolonial thought, as suggested by Walter Mignolo, who has critiqued Western universalism as a geopolitical device of epistemic exclusion, and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who highlighted how subaltern voices are systematically marginalized by the theoretical canons of the West. See Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011 and *The Idea of Latin America,* Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2005; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, see also *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.

To fully understand the meaning of this reflection, it is essential to trace, even briefly, the history of the Sahrawi people, an emblematic story of marginalization and struggle that reveals the deep contradictions of modern political and legal categories. Often referred to as "Africa's last colony,"[11] the Sahrawi people are at the center of a forgotten conflict, victims of prolonged occupation and systematic cultural and political erasure. Their history is one of dispossession and exile, but also of tenacious resistance, which has expressed itself over time not only through armed struggle but also through an extraordinary capacity for social and institutional organization.

The creation of the Polisario Front in 1973 marked the beginning of organized political mobilization for independence from colonial rule. The following year saw the birth of the *Union nationale des femmes sahraouies* (UNFS), representing the intertwining of national liberation and female protagonism in the construction of a resistant collective identity.[12]With Spain's withdrawal in 1975 and the immediate Moroccan occupation of the territory, a conflict emerged that continues to this day. On February 27, 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed, in exile and in the complete absence of military and financial support, as a political and symbolic act of self-determination.

In 1980, Morocco began the construction of the separation wall, known as the Berm, a fortification over 2,700 km long, littered with anti-personnel mines. Besides being an imposing physical barrier, the Berm serves as a symbol of colonial authoritarianism and the inertia of the international community, which, despite numerous UN resolutions, has never managed to secure a just and lasting solution.[13] The ceasefire signed in 1988 under the aegis of the United Nations was supposed to lead to a referendum on self-determination in 1991, managed by the MINURSO mission (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara). However, due to Morocco's ongoing obstruction and substantial international disinterest, the referendum never took place, and the issue of Western Sahara remains an open wound in international law to this day.

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11 Toby Shelley thus defines Western Sahara by analyzing its geopolitical dynamics in depth, see *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?,* London: Zed Books, 2013.

12 Allan Joanna discusses extensively how the Polisario Front has emphasized women's prominence in the construction of Sahrawi national identity: see "Imagining Saharawi Women: The Question of Gender in POLISARIO Discourse" in *The Journal of North African Studies,* 15, no. 4 (2010): 377–392.

13 This passage is discussed extensively by Stephen, Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution,* New York: Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2022.

According to Embarka Hamoudi Hamdi,[14] the history of the Sahrawi people can be understood through three basic phases. The first, from 1976 to 1979, is marked by the stabilization of the refugee camps, where the Sahrawi community faced forced exile and the challenge of survival. The second phase, from 1979 to 1990, is characterized by the empowerment of women, who played a central role in the resistance and the reconstruction of the community. Finally, from 1991 to the present day, we observe the return of men and social reorganization, a complex process that continues to evolve in response to the political difficulties and daily challenges of the struggle for self-determination.

The story of the Sahrawi people also fits within an international legal framework that legitimizes their cause. The *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*[15] (1981) enshrines fundamental rights that resonate deeply with the identity of this people, such as the right to self-determination and liberation for oppressed peoples. It serves as a testament to resistance against occupation and identity-building, intrinsically linked to a broader international commitment to human rights and decolonization, as evidenced by the Charter's principles of freedom, equality, justice, and dignity. This legal instrument establishes, among other things, a commitment to eliminate all forms of colonialism in Africa and to promote international cooperation.

In particular, Article 12 of the Charter guarantees every individual the right to choose the state in which they reside, the right to leave it, and the right to return, as well as the right to asylum in case of persecution. Article 19, which recognizes the rights of peoples, and particularly Article 20, form the heart of this battle. Article 20(2) states that colonized or oppressed peoples have the right to free themselves from their condition of domination using all means recognized by the international community. Furthermore, Article 20(3) enshrines the right of peoples to international solidarity, declaring that all peoples have the right to receive assistance from the member states of the Charter in their struggle for liberation against foreign domination, whether political, economic, or cultural.

Morocco's systematic violations of the Sahrawi people's rights are not only a serious affront to international legality but also a clear example of

14 Hamoudi Hamdi, Embarka, "Las mujeres saharauis 30 años después" in *Trabajadores de la Enseñanza CCOO*, 271, 2006, 8-9. Reference also present in the study of Enrique Bengochea Tirado, "La movilización nacionalista saharaui y las mujeres durante el último periodo colonial español" in *Revista Historia Autónoma* 3 (2013): 113–128.

15 Fully available here: https://au.int/fr/treaties/charte-africaine-des-droits-de-lhomme-et-des-peuples.

the global community's political inertia. This inertia is particularly evident when confronted with the vitality of the Sahrawi resistance, which does not end with the defense of territory but expresses itself above all as a struggle for dignity and fundamental rights. The Sahrawi question transcends the simple geopolitical context: it is a claim for historical justice, a concept intertwined with philosophical reflections on decolonization.

Indeed, Frantz Fanon[16] had already strongly denounced how occupation is not merely a matter of economic exploitation but represents an act of cultural and psychological violence capable of undermining the entire social order of the colonized people. This analysis found an important reworking in Achille Mbembe's philosophy of decolonization. In *On the Postcolony,*[17] Mbembe demonstrates how colonial domination is mainly exercised through the internalization of a symbolic hierarchy that permeates cultural, affective, and cognitive structures. His reflection enables us to understand the occupation of Western Sahara as an act of systemic violence that extends far beyond the control of territory: it operates deep within subjectivity, making Sahrawi resistance not only political but also ontological and epistemological.

The violation of Sahrawis' rights, therefore, goes far beyond mere control of resources; it is symbolic of a violent and patriarchal imposition that lacks even a convincing economic justification, and thus takes on significant philosophical meaning. The fact that the costs of occupation outweigh the economic benefits of exploiting local resources makes it clear that every war, occupation, or form of colonization is never solely a material matter. On the contrary, it is always an exercise of power aimed at imposing a symbolic and political order: denying autonomy, silencing difference, and repressing subjectivities that resist. This manipulative narrative is also legitimized by the support of powers such as France and the United States for the Moroccan regime, support that helps reinforce the imperial logic hiding behind supposed economic rationalities and feeds an oppressive system that reduces the Sahrawi people to a condition of invisibility.

Rather than being based on a vision of decolonization as mere liberation from a colonial power or a return to an original state, this study takes resistance as a central and constitutive category. The experience of the Sahrawi people, in this sense, represents a privileged vantage point for thinking about resistance not as a passive reaction or nostalgic recovery of the past, but as an active

16 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* New York: Grove Press, 2004, 10.

17 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony,* Berkeley*:* University of California Press, 2001, 79.

practice of liberation. Resistance, in fact, is itself a process of decolonization: it not only opposes colonial domination, but it opens up new spaces for political and cultural subjectivation, producing continuous transformations of identity.

From this perspective, it makes no sense to speak only of liberation from external domination, since colonization, even once formally concluded, continues to act deep within the social body, leaving persistent traces in mental and relational structures and cultural codes. What is really at stake lies in defusing those invisible sedimentations of colonial power that continue to operate in everyday life. Precisely because colonial trauma does not disappear with the departure of the colonizer, but survives as a historical and psychological memory, a profound political and cultural work is necessary, which only the creative and transformative action of resistance is capable of activating.

This leads to a reflection on the experience of the Sahrawi people, who are distinguished by their ability to oppose not only external colonial domination but also the risk of 'internal colonization' of their social and cultural structures. Its history, marked by dispossession, resistance, and the struggle for self-determination, is configured as a complex process, in which a decisive role is played by a dimension that is often marginalized in political-military narratives: female and feminist resistance, which constitutes its essence. In this context, the figure of the Sahrawi woman does not merely represent a reaction to repression but embodies the transformative resistance of a people that renews itself through critical thinking and the production of new meanings. Female and feminist activism not only redefines the modalities of the struggle for self-determination but also affirms the collective capacity to elaborate new paradigms of justice, rights, and freedom.

Such a process, however, has not been without contradictions. The transformation of women's roles within the Sahrawi struggle has been intertwined with broader political tensions that have run through the movement. The democratization of the Polisario Front was the result of long and difficult internal processes of contestation and reform. The uprisings of 1988-89, in particular, were crucial in redefining the collective management of power and in reconfiguring the active presence of women within political and social structures. According to scholar E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, the Polisario strategically reduced its emphasis on Islam and traditional cultural practices in order to attract international support.[18] However, in-

18 In particular, she pointed out that, in the contemporary geopolitical context marked by concerns about Islamism and terrorism in North Africa, the Polisario has promoted an image of 'religious tolerance' and 'secularism' in its interactions with various non-Sahrawi interlocutors, aiming to present the Sahrawi camps as ideal

terpreting this choice solely as an opportunistic strategy entails a biased analysis, which risks falling into a typical Western-centric perspective that reduces the complexity of the Sahrawi political vision. Even before the foundation of the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi people had developed a social structure that, in many respects, can be defined as matriarchal. The valorization of the female figure was a constant in community organization: women were not only responsible for the day-to-day running of the camps and the education of their children but also played a central role in the transmission of knowledge, in the cohesion of the social fabric, and in collective decision-making.

The Polisario Front represents a form of political organization that, from its origins, has embodied an anti-patriarchal model of civil society, opposing traditional tribal structures and actively promoting women's participation in all spheres of society. In this new political space, women have assumed a central role not only in armed struggle but also in defining an alternative vision of community and justice. A concrete testimony to this political approach is the founding in 1974 of the *Union Nationale des Femmes Sahraouies* (UNFS),[19] whose activities are articulated on several levels: from direct mobilization and political training to the occupation and creation of spaces—both physical and symbolic—of daily resistance in the refugee camps and institutions of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD).

We come to the core of the proposed thesis. The feminism of Sahrawi resistance is not a consequence of the political process, but rather the sine qua non of its success. Without the protagonism of women—without the assertion of a social model that rejects patriarchy—the Sahrawi resistance would not have been effective. The rejection of patriarchy, intrinsic to the Sahrawi vision, is a prerequisite for the success of the struggle, not a re-

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spaces of interfaith coexistence. See: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena, "The Pragmatics of Performance: Putting 'Faith' in Aid in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps" in *Journal of Refugee Studies,* 24, no. 3 (2011): 533–547, 535; her book *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival,* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, represents one of the most comprehensive and theoretically articulate studies on the experience of Sahrawi women in the Tindouf refugee camps. The author analyzes in depth the central role assumed by women not only in the management of daily life, but also in the political, cultural and symbolic construction of the Sahrawi nation in exile. The study highlights how women were presented – internally and internationally – as "ideal refugees," becoming key figures in the narrative of resistance and in the elaboration of a collective identity capable of combining emancipation, Islam and anticolonial struggle.

19 The official website can be accessed at: https://www.arso.org/UNFS-1.htm.

sult of it. Dolores Juliano[20] highlights how, unlike other Islamic nationalist movements, Sahrawi women have not separated the struggle for gender equality from the fight for political independence. Sahrawi feminism does not merely claim equality but pursues collective emancipation that includes the liberation of the entire people. Here, gender claims are not the ultimate goal, but a means to emancipation: women's rights are inseparable from political independence.

It is precisely this that makes Sahrawi resistance not merely a reactive response to external colonial power, but a process of radical transformation, resulting in the recreation of meanings, values, and relationships, including those of gender. This recreation was made possible by the condition of exile, which profoundly redefined the political and social organization of the Sahrawi people, and by the reality of the Sahara as a laboratory for concrete utopian social and political rewriting. In this condition of prolonged separation, men—and some women—dedicated themselves to armed struggle, while women assumed the role of administrators of the government, based on a democratic model. Juliano defines this form of women's activism as an "implicit claim,"[21] based on lived practice rather than theoretical elaborations or ideological declarations.

This perspective is particularly relevant because it questions the very concept of tradition, understood in a conservative sense as the custodian of an immovable value or as a closed normative system. In the context of Sahrawi culture, made even more complex by the intersection of Arab, African, and Muslim women's identities, tradition does not merely preserve the status quo, but, in keeping with the paradigm of resistance, becomes a terrain for action and experimentation. This conception of tradition aligns with two timely studies in this regard: on the one hand, Eric Hobsbawm's,[22] who considers tradition an active historical construction, defining it as "invented," often intentionally formulated to provide symbolic continuity in moments of discontinuity, crisis, or redefinition of identity; on the other,

20 Dolores Juliano, *La causa saharaui y las mujeres: siempre fuimos tan libres,* Barcelona: Icaria, 1998.

21 Dolores Juliano, "Género, cooperación y cultura en los campamentos saharauis: una reivindicación implícita" in *África diversa: estudios y testimonios sobre realidades africanas*, Raquel Sebastián and Aída Bueno, eds, Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2009, 111–127.

22 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1–14.

Stuart Hall's,[23] who emphasizes that cultural identity is never a stable or natural essence, but a process of articulation and re-inscription that occurs in specific historical and political contexts.

In a global context that frequently reduces questions of identity and tradition to xenophobic weapons, the complexity of the Sahrawi experience stands as a valuable model for initiating political dialogue and enriching the contemporary anti-colonial debate.

Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Universal Models of Emancipation

The feminist experience of the Sahrawi people is a political and social praxis that precedes any theorization, resisting crystallization into a universal model. However, an analysis of some of its specificities opens the door to a dialogue with feminist movements that transcend the dominant paradigm, helping to deconstruct the very concept of universality—or rather, its hegemonic claim as formulated by some Euro-Western feminist theories. This model, while presenting itself as inclusive, often excludes black, Arab, indigenous, and Global South female subjectivities, as though the only legitimate form of emancipation were that elaborated in a Western context.[24] The imposition of a universal model of female emancipation reinforces the very colonial narrative that many feminisms claim to deconstruct. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty has pointed out, the representation of women in the so-called Third World as passive subjects to be 'liberated'[25] reproduces a colonial logic within feminist discourse itself. In this way, 'gender coloniality' becomes an integral part of the colonial project, imposing sexual categories and gender roles according to Western models.[26] Donna Haraway's reflections[27] marked a turning point, rejecting any claim to universal objectivity and instead affirming the notion of "situated knowl-

23 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford ed., London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222–237.

24 Bell hooks had already emphasized the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, critiquing a feminism that marginalizes Black and poor women in its theoretical and political discourses. See the important contribution *Ain't I a woman: black women and feminism,* London, Routledge, 2015.

25 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2,* 12, no. 3 (1984): 333–358, 353.

26 Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 2 (Spring 2008): 1–17.

27 Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,* College Park, Md: Feminist Studies, 1988.

edge"—knowledge that arises from concrete, embodied, often marginalized positions, which, precisely for this reason, carry essential political and epistemological truths.

Criticism of a universalist model of female emancipation is a hallmark of Islamic feminism, which, in line with the liberal reading of the Koran undertaken by Sahrawi women, is rooted in a radical critique of the patriarchal interpretation of the sacred text. As Fatima Mernissi[28] pointed out, and later echoed by Asma Lamrabet,[29] it is not the content of the Koran itself that is chauvinistic and misogynistic, but the historical interpretations shaped within contexts dominated by patriarchal power structures. By unmasking the distortions introduced by centuries of male exegesis, one can recover an original message of justice and equity, consistent with the spiritual principles of Islam. From this perspective, the rereading of the sacred text is not only a religious act, but also a political action that challenges cultural hegemony and offers a concrete alternative to the universalist and Eurocentric narrative of women's emancipation.

The second point of comparison is with ecofeminism, which, like Islamic feminism, emerged as a critique of a universalist and dominant model. Developed by thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, ecofeminist theory denounces the structural intertwining of patriarchy and capitalism, illustrating how the exploitation of women and nature are expressions of the same logic of domination. In their joint work *Ecofeminism*, Shiva and Mies argue that the Western development model—based on extraction, unlimited growth, and the commodification of life—is built on the denial of local knowledge and practices, particularly those related to care, reproduction, and sustainability.[30]

In the Sahrawi context, this perspective finds concrete expression in everyday practices that challenge the colonial paradigm of 'development' and foster community-based self-management. Forced exile and the desertification of the territory have made Sahrawi women key players in strategies of environmental and social resilience, rooted in relationships

28 Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy. Fear of the Modern World,* New York: Baisc Books, 2002; *The veil and the male elite:a feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam,* Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1991.

29 Asma Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading,* Markfield: Square View, 2018; *Women and Men in the Qur'ān,* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

30 In the context of a broader critique of science increasingly detached from politics, the authors also stress the need not to confine the discourse on ecofeminism to a purely academic sphere: see *Ecofeminism,* London: Zed Books, 1993, 43.

of reciprocity and collective resource management. Their central role in the construction and survival of refugee camps, as well as in the distribution of water, and the organization of food and education, demonstrates how caring for the territory—even in extreme conditions—becomes a political act, a form of resistance, and a collective affirmation. As Mies and Shiva argue, care is not an individual, privatized task, but a *lebenspraxis* (life practice) that links the environment, body, and community. In this light, Sahrawi women's knowledge emerges as situated ecopolitical knowledge, capable of offering concrete alternatives to the colonial and capitalist development model.

A third interpretive key frames the Sahrawi experience as a form of epistemic resistance,[31] which aligns closely with the decolonial feminist theories of authors like Françoise Vergès, María Lugones, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. This form of resistance addresses epistemological racism, which, in the aftermath of colonialism, has systematically excluded or subordinated the knowledge produced by indigenous, black, and subaltern women. This strand of thought rejects the hegemonic narrative of Eurocentric feminism and advocates for epistemic pluralism, grounded in the lived experiences and historical and geographical positioning of subjects.[32] The legacy of colonialism is further perpetuated through a 'civilizing feminism' that seeks to impose models of emancipation developed in the global North.[33] In this light, the Sahrawi struggle exemplifies epistemic resistance, producing political knowledge and transformative practices from a position of structural marginality.

Ecofeminist and decolonial reflections closely intersect, as both reveal a convergent structure of exclusion: what does not conform to the dominant (Western, male, capitalist) rationality is deemed inferior or irrelevant, both cognitively and socioeconomically. The knowledge produced by women on the margins of the world-system—black, indigenous, Arab, Muslim, from the global South—has been systematically excluded from the dominant circuits of knowledge production. Similarly, the work traditionally associ-

31 Mignolo uses the term epistemic disobedience, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing local and indigenous epistemologies as legitimate forms of knowledge, in opposition to the universalist claims of Western epistemologies. See "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto" in *Transmodernity*, no. 1(2) (2011), 44-66.

32 See María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" in *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209; Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "The Notion of 'Rights' and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Modernity: Indigenous Peoples and Women in Bolivia" in *Qui Parle*, 18, no. 2 (2010): 29–54.

33 Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism,* London: Pluto Press, 2020.

ated with women—care, social reproduction, community organization—as well as that of nature—regeneration, balance, sustenance—are regarded as passive or unproductive, as they do not conform to capitalist logic.

The points of reflection emerging from the comparison between Sahrawi resistance and anti-colonial feminist theories are multiple, offering various angles to address women's emancipation from a perspective that challenges dominant structures of oppression. One crucial aspect to explore is the critique of the logic of *rattrapage*—the idea that the Global South must 'catch up' with the Global North. This narrative not only justifies inequality but perpetuates a vision of domination that dismisses local and indigenous alternatives. This critique is closely linked to discussions on demographic policies, often constructed without considering the actual needs of communities. The myth of overpopulation and racialized policies targeting the birthrate of poor women reflect a patriarchal view of society that sustains structural inequalities. Presented as solutions to poverty or environmental crises, these policies are ultimately instruments of control, disproportionately affecting women from subaltern classes and former colonies. Such policies reinforce patriarchal power structures by focusing on the female body, while neglecting the education and responsibility of men. The regulation of subaltern populations, therefore, is filtered through the centrality of the female body, reduced to a mere resource to be controlled.

The importance of engaging with different feminist theories lies, among other things, in their ability to represent diverse perspectives, shaped by heterogeneous geographical and cultural contexts that cross the divides between North and South, East and West. This pluralism enables them to articulate a complex critique of global forms of domination, shedding light on how oppressive dynamics manifest in differentiated yet interconnected ways. Their dialogue, even if implicit, contributes to constructing a theoretical framework in which the Sahrawi experience is not viewed as an exception, but rather as a paradigm of resistance that transcends Eurocentric narratives, recognizing the plurality of emancipation experiences in the Mediterranean and beyond.

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