

**Laila Karrouch**

# We are all citizens of the world

**I close my large dark eyes and attempt to bring back images of Morocco, the country where I was born. It isn't very hard to do at all. In my own mind everything reruns like some nineteen-eighties' film; I can quite clearly recall images, remarks, smells, sensations and even perfumes. I was born in the city of Nador, but lived with my large family in a village about ten kilometres from the city. We used to live in a very big farmhouse where we had a little land. I remember people talking about Europe as if it were the perfect place to make and remake their lives.**

Crossing the Mediterranean sea had become a dream that everyone wanted to come true one day, except for the elderly, who laughingly used to say that it was too late for them and that they wanted to die in the same country that they had been born in, under the same sky, and among the same scents. But we didn't think about all that, perhaps because it all seemed so far off, so far away. We younger ones, who already wanted to be grown up, managed to hear these things too.

The people in my village created their own image of Europe, one that in many cases did not coincide with reality. I too built my own Europe. With the scanty information that I had obtained by hearsay, perhaps unconsciously, I decorated and dressed up the reality to build a different country, the country of glory itself. I also made my own image of the people: I thought that they had a really peaceful lifestyle, with no stress or headaches since they lived in such a rich place and so must surely all be on easy street. I thought that hardly any women worked outside the house and that they had plenty of spare time for themselves, to devote to keeping pretty, and do other things with their time. Right from the first day I could see that this was not the case. I fell into the trap, a trap that life itself has ready and waiting for us, a trap into which many continue to fall. It is no good for those of us who now know this to warn others, because our words are blown away

in the wind. Here there is the example of the people coming over on the *patera* dinghies. Have we ever stopped to think if all those people, most of them young, know what they are going to find when they arrive at their destination, if they ever do arrive? It breaks my heart just to think of it. Sometimes I think that they *do* know what is waiting for them, but they must reckon that anything is better than their present situation. They must also think of the possibility that things might turn out all right. I sometimes try to imagine myself in the shoes of these people's parents. It must be very hard when you think that your son is out with his friends or at some relatives' house; you wait for him until late and get angry because you had told him not to come home late as it makes you worry, and you get tired of waiting, and your heart tries to say something to you, but you don't know what. You rush here and there, from one bedroom to another, wish so hard for him to come in through the door and say, "hello mum, I'm sorry, I was talking to some friends...and, you know... once you get talking" —you would run up to him, hug him and tell him not to do it again, that it's all right. But you're wrong, because it doesn't turn out that way at all. The next day you hear on the television that so many immigrants who have attempted to cross the sea in boats have lost their lives, and you think, "No, good grief, no!" What you suspected is confirmed: they call at your house to tell you that they are bringing you your son, your son's body. Now I am a mother I think of it and don't wish to believe that this really happens, and think that it is all the fruit of my imagination, but don't let's be taken in, I can't deceive myself. I suppose that for them, this is like throwing a coin up, it can be either heads or tails. All right, it's a very common comparison, but it is real, all too real. What need do they have to put their lives at stake if it is not to feed their families and feed themselves?

**In the village everyone greets and admires** those who go on holidays to spend some time with their families. Everyone pays attention to the way they dress, fix their hair, take care of themselves, the way they express themselves, the European model. The kids all want to get in their "supercar" to have a drive around the village so everyone can see them and wave. People do not want to listen to the words of those who wish to tell the real story because they live there and not here, in this country where it is so hard to find an opportunity to earn one's living. I just can't say to what extent people are aware of the reality and to what extent they aren't. I can only assure you that people often fall into wishful thinking because we all want to aspire to a world with some hope in it.

People normally don't consider flying from their own nests just like that. It used to be men who were the first to go to seek work and accommodation and thus build an invisible road that would later on be taken by the rest of the family when the economic situation allowed this. Now it is not the husband who takes this step, but whoever is first to get the chance, whether it is the man or the woman. I also know cases in which it has not been like that: Mohammed managed to get a visa to finish his studies in Spain. He assured me that he did not intend to stay here at any point, but while he was studying, he worked to pay for his studies and when he completed them he decided to stay here to live. Mohammed had the chance to choose, but the immense majority of people don't. One of these was my father. He was the first one to come over here when I had not yet been born. A little later he was thrown out because his papers weren't in order. He never gave in at any time, but the despair that he felt inside, the need to keep going for the family's sake, made him try again a second time. This time he managed not to

be deported again, but even if he had been, he would have kept on trying. It took him eight years to find a job, accommodation, enough money for air tickets for his wife and children and papers. I have never seen so many papers in my whole life! If documents were bank notes we would have enough to feed a whole country for years; anyway half of them were not good for anything. They made me immigrate and leave my country at eight years of age, without knowing what all the fuss was about. I did not understand it, because I always had something to eat on the table. The economic problems of the family were unknown to me or I could not see them, what did I know about it, poor me, just a kid! From then on I became just another immigrant, like thousands and thousands of people all over the world. And now I ask myself, just what is immigration? How do we all understand this word and above all, how should we live through this immigration? I think that we all know more or less what it is, but for many people the conflict lies in how we should live through it. It is not so easy to answer this last question as it is the first. I am nobody to say how we should live, but I think that, whatever the case, there should be a very important basis, mutual respect, in the decision which any of us makes. And emigrating —what does emigrating mean? For many people it means leaving their own country to go and live in another. But this might also sometimes mean leaving your village to go to another, another city, another district. You don't need to make a long journey to emigrate.

After the decision to emigrate has been made and the opportunity has arisen, there is no way back. You just have to close your eyes, brace yourself and say goodbye to your friends and family the best way you can. This is not the time to think of anything else. Your heart beats harder and harder. You have to try and control your feelings, which is not easy for anyone. Your eyes are bound first to get damp, and then shed one tear after another, which eventually meet at your chin. You cannot conceal how exhausted you are from the nights that you have not been able to sleep because you are trying to build an imaginary future, without your own loved ones by your side. You will miss them before even leaving them, you will automatically remember the remarks that all the neighbours made to you, one by one. You will cry for those who have loved you for so long. You will say goodbye to that neighbour who you were angry with and hug them as if they were a close friend, pass on your sadness to them and make them cry, for you and with you. Who knows when you will be back?

**I can clearly remember that day**, the day when I said goodbye to my people. I have it engraved in my head. I cried out and sobbed in silence. Suddenly each little corner, each moment had its importance and value, great value, for me. It seemed that the birds stopped flying to listen to our murmurs, that the plants did not give off any odour so as not to get mixed up with our perfumes. At times like these a sort of improvised atmosphere is created, an atmosphere full of tenderness coming from those who are around you and those who aren't. When I got into the car I had the feeling of coming back from a journey that I had made to another planet when really I was not coming back at all, but leaving for another world. When I think it all over I feel lucky because I had my parents and my brothers beside me, but what about those who don't? Many couples have to live their loves remotely, over the telephone and by letters, others have to give up this love, others miss their children's childhood and when they go back the little ones have grown a few centimetres and a few years. They feel the sadness of not being able to

accompany them to bed to sing them off to sleep, or not being able to tell them off when they do something wrong, but they have the consolation of thinking that all they are doing is first and foremost for them. For those who stay behind the fortunate ones are the ones who leave. They wish us luck and believe that we have got it all sorted out.

Some people have relatives or acquaintances who advise them where to go. They might offer them their homes for a while

for them to stay until they find somewhere else. My father came to Catalonia because he had an uncle here. He told him that he could stay with him for a few days and that he would help him, but for how long? He didn't know. He had no other choice. My father intended to stay in Catalonia and if he didn't find anything he would have to ask his uncle to lend him some money to go to some other country to try

his luck. When he found something he would pay him back. He was lucky, considering that many people don't have anyone they know when they arrive and end up wherever destiny drops them. They look around for someone the same colour as them, someone who speaks the same language, and they ask for help. This whole process is obviously more painful for the grown-ups, as the younger ones have their own concerns.

Once you have found your destination you think that it is all going to be plain sailing, that your troubles are over and that the next episodes in your life are going to be the easiest to get through, but this is not the case. When you go out into the street you realise that people are talking to you and it doesn't make the least sense, just an odd word that rings a bell but you don't know what it means. You don't know if that person who is trying to communicate with you is being kind or just telling you to get lost —how can you know if you only just landed! You notice that the looks you get are not the same as you used to get, that the gestures are different and you feel strange— or might it be the other person who is speaking to you who is the strange one? You don't know either, neither you nor the person with you! The first days are the hardest to cope with and the ones that you remember most distinctly, but I am unable to remember a great many things about last year, for example. A few days after arriving I started to go to school. Seeing seventeen children in the class who all know each other and talk to each other and you... are an outsider for all of them because your skin is darker, you don't speak the same language and you have just arrived from a very poor world. The sensations and the feelings were all mixed up together and it came to a point when I didn't know what I really felt, whether I was afraid, if it was excitement, I just didn't know. I didn't understand their words, and they didn't grasp mine, but I understood, when they took my hand and gave me the ball, that it meant they wanted me to play with them. Thank heaven for sign language! Young children are able to understand each other in a matter of days; they make themselves understood because they want to play and have a good time. When they look at you their eyes don't see races or cultures, they don't see higher

**“You are an outsider for all of them because your skin is darker, you don't speak the same language and you have just arrived from a very poor world”**





| L'última discussió de D. Rivera i Trotski (The Last Argument between D. Rivera and Trotsky) Artur Heras (2005) acrylic on canvas 200 x 360 cm

or lower classes of people, they can't see any of that until the grown-ups decide to complicate things for them sometimes. In fact you go to school to learn, amongst other things, language, which is a weapon to defend your self against everything. It is much harder for adults because they don't have such learning facilities and are not sponges who soak everything up like children. My father often told me things about his first contacts with the new society; the first bar in Vic when they let Moroccans in, or the first person who rented them a flat or simply the first supermarket when they could buy stuff without being turned out. He can remember that boy who showed him where a street was and that man who helped him with his shopping bags. I also remember a lot of people who became important for me, people for whom I perhaps meant something too.

You are surprised when you find out that finding a job is not quite as easy as you had thought. You go to all kinds of places

**“The situation of illegal immigrants is desperate. They don't have any way out either one side or the other”**

and get a categorical *no!* for a reply. You have to take the first one you find, do the work that nobody else wants to do and do it at whatever price they pay, if you actually manage to find it, of course. The feeling of inferiority will remain in your heart. It is then that you begin to blame yourself for having been born where you were and you do so even though you know that

it was not your decision, nor anyone else's. I did not really have any major problems at school, but looking for work was when I started to get in touch with reality. When I discovered that I was speaking two languages at the same time, Catalan and Castilian, and not one, I thought that they were both important because I wanted to be ready for the working world. I wanted to master the language like the locals so that they would not look down on me. I too was turned down in many places, knowing that they still had the poster saying “staff needed” hanging on the entrance door. After roving around all over I realised that not everyone is equal, that —just as the local people judge us by the colour of our skin and by the way we dress— we, the newcomers, also judge them unfairly. I finally managed to get a job of work. Somebody looked in my eyes without establishing any difference, without any sort of unnecessary obstacle in the way. Many other people like me tell similar stories. The problem doesn't end here, in the least. When you eventually find that job you discover that they ask you for a number of papers that you haven't got, even though you are legally in the country. You make trip after trip to the Government Immigration Office, lawyers, administration agents, births and deaths register or police station because you want to be a citizen with the same rights and duties as everyone else. The situation of illegal immigrants is desperate. They don't have any way out either one side or the other. They find out that they cannot go forward nor move back. Businessmen cannot have people working without papers, but to get one the worker has to have a residence permit, and to have a residence permit you have to have an employment contract, and round and round it goes. Some get in touch with their relatives who are in other European countries to find out what the situation is like there and if there is any chance for them. Most often they reply that things are even worse,

that it is one obstacle after another. Others opt, in the last resort, for asking their parents and neighbours for help... The worst off are the people who have a family to support. The days become much too long for them, and everything looks black, too black. When there was that earthquake in Morocco I learned a lot, as well as finding out about the situation of these illegal immigrants. Many of them tried to contact their families to find out how they were, if there were any injured, if they were all alive. Some couldn't get in touch with anyone, some found out that they had lost a member of their families. Their desolate faces could be seen in the streets. "Now what on earth do I do, leave or stay? If I go I shan't be able to come back and if I stay I shan't be able to go and bury my loved ones." This was the question they were asking themselves. I too despaired because I felt impotent, and couldn't do anything to help them.

When you leave your country you take a lot of things with you; the memories of the family, your festive occasions, your dancing... a lot of things which you can never throw overboard, however much you might want. This is something that takes people a lot to understand, above all the matter of the headscarf. It seems that people give a lot of importance to a person's exterior —how they are dressed, whether they are wearing a long or short skirt...

**A lot of people cannot understand why I wear my headscarf** if I am in another country, if I do not have to wear it, if I am not forced to. Under the headscarves there are normal girls, happy, fun-loving girls, girls with qualifications and a great will to live and who wear the headscarf just like some people dye their hair different colours. What is wrong with that? It all boils down to our needing to be aware that life goes by and never stops at any time. We all have to be our own owners and take the road which we believe we should take, on condition that we do no harm to anyone, of course. This is what took my mother so much to get over. She was born in Algeria and wore a scarf on her head from a very early age. Years later on she emigrated to Morocco. She didn't notice any difference or feel any different from the rest of the community because everyone dressed in the same way. This is what happens to coloured people who arrive from different places. They are more readily accepted because a lot are Christians and do not cover themselves up so much. If they didn't have dark skin they wouldn't have any kind of trouble.

The year we arrived we only found two families of Moroccans in Vic, a very pretty town in the county of Osona. We were the third. We were fairly far apart and so didn't have very close relations. The neighbours were all Catalans and Castilians. When my mother went down the street everyone looked at her, perhaps through curiosity, or because they weren't used to seeing a lady so covered up. I don't know why, but in all events she used to say that it was a very uncomfortable situation and she could not go on that way. I suppose that it can't be much fun to have so many stares following you down the street. At home they considered two possible solutions: staying at home and not going out, which would mean no-one would be able to stare at her, or taking off the scarf so as not to be looked at by everyone. She went for the first option. It worked for a few days until our economic situation worsened. Things got so bad that my father decided we would go back to Morocco. In Catalonia you have more chances to find work, but the standard of living is much higher and things are too expensive and even more so when you have five children. My mother then decided to take the second option. She took off her scarf, bought some new clothes and went out to look for work. People stopped looking at her



as an oddity, then. Many people she knew approached her in a different way and accepted her better. They even told her that she was a lot prettier like that and that the scarf made her look a lot bigger than she really was. They talked to my mother *without* a scarf about my earlier mother *with* a scarf as if they were two different people. You could say that the problem had been solved as regards other people, but there was another underlying question which those people did not know about. For my mother the scarf was very important, it was another piece of clothing, like shoes or trousers, that she needed to feel fully clad. Going out into the street without a scarf was like going out undressed. She had a lot of mental conflicts. People asked her to adapt —a word that she never fully understood and that ended up bringing her down. But she pulled herself together precisely because she wanted to pull herself out of it. She started wearing her scarf again. People continued to look at her as before. Less and less all the time because they were starting to get used to it. As they got to know what she was like, the scarf ceased to be what mattered. But apart from all this, there are things which immigrants find hard to understand, too. We are quick to attribute any particular comments or requirements at work to racism. For example, if you work in a place where they handle foodstuffs, there are rules that we all have to obey, both locals and newcomers. We cannot be so rigid about customs and traditions. I think that we have to learn to coexist in line with the times. Everything changes, even people's way of thinking.

Many immigrants come up against another problem when we go back to our home country to spend our holidays there for the first time: we are foreigners too, we are immigrants, not the same people as we were before leaving. How should one react then?

**When you live in a specific place for a particular time** I think that it is highly important to try and learn things from your surroundings and let people know things about yours too. We cannot shut ourselves in on ourselves, nor go on reliving that painful experience that we had with someone in particular. It is not fair to put everyone in the same bag because they do not deserve it. Everyone knows the reasons why we have “come” here. Immigrants come from poor countries where they find no other way out for themselves or their children. It is hard for everyone to accept the reality that we live through. We, as citizens of the world, don't have the answer up our sleeves and I think we never will have it, at least as regards the matter of legalisation. We do indeed have other solutions which are very important, such as coexistence. If people do not make an effort, the ones in power never will do. In my case, I have learned to value my surroundings, to understand the way my new neighbours think, and even think like them, but I also think like those who arrive. People say that I am very lucky because I live between two cultures, and I would say that, rather than two cultures, I live between three: Moroccan culture, Catalan culture and my own culture, which consists in taking the things which I like most from each of these, as well as from Castilian culture. I think that they all have their appeal and their magic. I am not forced to choose, I am free to live this way. I know that for many people I will never be a Catalan because the colour of my skin reveals that I am from abroad. It also seems to me that right now that is what bothers me least. I like looking the future more fully in the face because my daughter will go to school with a lot of kids from different parts of the world and we adults have to help to make things easier for them. Immigration is not what it used to be, we all know that. Now people are coming from all kinds of places. The local people are working on this and attempting to help the

newcomers, and those of us who have been here for a time also want things for them. There are volunteer language partners, all kinds of festivities, magazines, talks for parents... Indeed I think that parents, above all Moroccans, have to get it into our minds that our children's education system works in a different way than in our home countries, which is why we should try and cooperate more in our children's activities outside school, and I also feel that all of this will take at least one generation. It is not a matter of modifying the lifestyle that we have led up to now, but just of adapting a little more. For me adapting does not mean leaving your culture behind, it means keeping it and adding on another, adopting it, understanding it and —why not indeed?— loving it. It is like when parents adopt a child, they love it just the same even though it is not their biological child. I would also invite local people to become immigrants in their minds, and travel around other countries in the world imagining their situation by closing their eyes, like I do sometimes when I need to go to Morocco and can't make it because of my work. On a trip to Holland to visit my uncle and aunt, we met a Spanish family, and when they told me their story it seemed that they were telling my own. They said they will never forget Spain and that when they retire they will come back here to end their life's journey in the same place as it started. That is exactly what I think that many of us immigrants here will do or would like to do in the future II

**Laila Karrouch** (Morocco, 1977) works as nurse assistant at the Hospital General de Vic (Catalonia). She has narrated her experience as immigrant in the book **De Nador a Vic** (2004).