Tracing the *Ghorba*: A Narrative Enquiry of North African Diasporic "Homing Desires"'

Introduction:

In conversation with an extended family member about how I experienced moving from Denmark to live and study in the UK, I found myself using the Arabic word '*ghorba'* to describe my experiences. While the '*ghorba'* does not have a direct translation in English, it is approximated by words like estrangement, nostalgia, exile, and homesickness (Proglio 2024; Sayad 2004). Amongst the North African diaspora in Europe, *ghorba* is widely used to define and express the experience of being in diaspora and away from an imagined 'homeland' (Sayad 2004; Proglio 2024). Quick-witted, my family member responded with, "*Walakin ntina deja tewledti fi el-ghorba*!" [But you were already born in the *ghorba*!], referring to me being born and raised in Denmark.

Realizing that she was right, and that I, like most children of migrants in Europe, am a daughter of the *ghorba,* I decided to revisit North African literature, folk songs, and poetry to make sense of the *ghorba* as a concept and as an embodied experience. During my initial research, I quickly noticed that all the texts I came across – both academic and otherwise – spoke to and imagined the same *ghareeb.* In folk songs and academia, the imagined person experiencing the *ghorba* is the young man, who decides to leave his land of birth and move to Europe in pursuit of a better material life. Thus, popular narratives about the *ghorba* tell the stories of young male labor migrants, who migrated after North African countries gained independence (see e.g., Sayad 2004). To put it in the words of the Algerian Raï singer, Cheb Azzedine, folk songs and academia predominantly tell the story of how "*El ghalba date el aarbi lel ghorba*" [Poverty took the Arab (masculine) to the *ghorba*)].

While narratives about the experiences of male post-colonial and labor migrants are integral, as they were often the first to establish a life in Europe, the voices and labour (both paid and unpaid) of women migrants from North Africa to Europe have been disregarded and dismissed. This creates fragmented and unrealistic representations of the history of North African migration to Europe and also dominates the experiences of women. Beyond this, I noticed that little work had been done to explore the experiences of those of us who were, as my aunt put it, "born in *the ghorba*".

This paper is dedicated to complicating our understanding of who the *'ghareeb'* is and what the *ghorba* looks like to them. Due to the limited scope of the paper, I have chosen to present and analyze an excerpt from a narrative interview conducted with Yousra A., a woman descendant of Moroccan immigrants/emigrants, who was born and raised in Italy. Yousra is in her late 20s and works as a medical professional[1]. Her father emigrated to a small town in Italy in the 1980s and has been working in a factory since then. Her mother works in care. I have chosen to focus on one excerpt from my interview with Yousra to trace how she experiences belonging, 'home', and travel

[1] Yousra's exact job title will not be mentioned to safeguard her confidentiality. However, it is necessary to emphasize that her job requires a graduate degree and long-term specialized training.

and how she contrasts her experiences with her perception of her parents' experiences of home and belonging.

I am conscious of the risk of fetishizing Yousra's experience as a *ghriba* or *stranger* by 'spotlighting' her narrative in this paper without putting it in relation to the place and relations that create the *ghorba*. As Sara Ahmed (2000: 79) highlights,

> to take the figure of the stranger as simply present is to overlook and forget the very relationships of social antagonism that produce the stranger as a figure in the first place. Such a fetishisation of the stranger, indeed, such an ontology of the stranger as given in and to the world, conceals how 'the stranger' comes into being through the marking out of inhabitable spaces, bodies and terrains of knowledge.

To avoid fetishizing and trivializing Yousra's narrative, I, like Sara Ahmed (2000: 79), reject the notion that being a stranger or experiencing the *ghorba* is a universal experience. Instead, I argue that coloniality continues to create conditions of 'belonging' that exclude racialised, working-class people (Quijano 2000; Kalemba 2025). I understand coloniality as the enduring legacies of European colonialism, such as power structures and systems of knowledge, that continue to shape contemporary society (Quijano 2000). Thus, "[t]o talk of the migrant as the stranger is not sufficient", as one must simultaneously speak of the physical places and social systems that produce 'the stranger' in the first place (Ahmed 2000: 79). In my analysis of Yousra's narrative I therefore attempt to use her story as a springboard to understand and analyse the spaces and social systems that create her estrangement.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, I will briefly outline and connect some common definitions of the *ghorba*, conceptualizing the term as a *feeling* and *place*. The second section presents the excerpt of the narrative interview conducted with Yousra in 2025. This section draws inspiration from and speaks to the Algerian Sociologist, Abdelmalak Sayad's (2004) chapter, 'El Ghorba: From original sin to collective lie' published in his book, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*. In the chapter, Sayad (2004) presents and analyzes the discourse of Mohand A., a Kabyle emigrant from Algeria, who was living in France at the time of the interview. Two interviews were conducted with Mohand A. in 1975, one before he travelled to Algeria on holiday, and one after he returned from the holiday. 50 years later, Yousra addresses similar challenges regarding the *ghorba*, travel, and belonging. The last section provides an analysis of Yousra's narrative and what it tells us about the children of *the ghorba*. I present the argument that while the *ghorba became* a social condition that our parents had to navigate, it is an inescapable social condition for the children of the *ghorba,* who know no alternatives to it.

The Ghorba: As place and affect

The word '*ghorba*' is hardly defined in English, but often used by North African and Arab diasporic communities to describe an internal experience of estrangement, un-belonging, and longing for lands more familiar. As highlighted by Nadeen Dakkak (2023: 1), it is a versatile concept due to the vast array of experiences it describes. Yet, it is also versatile due to the frequency with which it is used in everyday conversation and the simultaneous scope of literature, arts, and culture that feature it as their centre. Nadeen Dakkak (2023: 1) succinctly defines the *ghorba* as:

> It is at once the fact of being physically distant as a foreigner far away from home, a psychological and emotional state of alienation and estrangement, and a reference to the foreign place itself, the land where one becomes a stranger and suffers the challenges that accompany this position, be they mundane, everyday struggles of adaptation, or the deeper strains of homesickness.

Thus, the *ghorba* is a concrete physical place that the body and mind can travel to but also an emotion, or an affect. I move away from the traditional understanding of emotions as entirely uncontrollable and non-agentic individual physical responses (Ahmed 2004). Sara Ahmed (2004: 6-7) understands emotions as being directed or oriented towards particular objects. She elaborates that they "are intentional in the sense that they are 'about' something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object" and thereby a way of perceiving the world and society (Ahmed 2004: 7). She gives the example of a child, who comes into contact with a bear, which, in turn, evokes fear in the child. However, she highlights that,

> fear is not in the child, let alone in the bear, but is a matter of how child and bear come into contact. This contact is shaped by past histories of contact, unavailable in the present, which allow the bear to be apprehended as fearsome (Ahmed 2004: 8).

Thus, Ahmed shows that emotions are socially, culturally, politically, and historically mediated. As highlighted by Dakkak's definition, the *ghorba* also has distinct orientations. Firstly, it is oriented towards the place, systems, and structures that one feels *ghareeb* in (or, estranged from). Second, it is, at once, orientated towards and positioned away from a place that one feels at home in or experiences 'homesickness' and longing for, whether that be a real physical place or an imaginative space. The following section further shows how the *ghorba* can orient racialized bodies towards seeking a 'home'.

Home, Belonging, and Inter-generational Conversations:

This section features two excerpts from the narrative interview conducted with Yousra. When I conducted the interview, Yousra had recently started wearing the *hijab*, which shapes the context of our conversation about belonging and estrangement.

Belonging as a Scam:

I would say that I feel at home when I am around my people. And when I say 'my people', I am not referring to Moroccan people or Italian people, but those people that really welcome me as I am without questioning anything about my identity or my story or my values or whatever.

But I would not say that I feel at home when I am just around in Italy, especially now that I have decided to start wearing [the] hijab. I feel that it is completely different for me to navigate the same spaces [that I used to navigate] and I am not even talking about spaces that I had strong connections to, like hospitals or [my] university, because, fortunately, I had nice experiences [there] with people welcoming me as someone, who wears hijab, but like, when I am in the train station or at the bus station, I feel that I have a different experience now. I feel that I am not seen as someone who belongs here, but before, when I was showing my hair, I wasn't seen, at the first glance, as someone 'foreign'. It was different. I somehow felt that I belonged more [then], but it was just a scam, because nothing changed about me. I am the same person. I just put an item in addition to my way of clothing, so it was just a scam to feel or to think that you belong to this space when

they see you as someone that belongs to this space only if you meet their fashion or clothing rules, you know?

"A Metaphorical Place to Call Home":

I would say that I feel that we have more opportunities than our parents. Of course, I cannot talk generally, but from my experience, I would say that my parents really spent all their life focusing on work, work, work to guarantee better opportunities for us [Yousra and her sibling]. So, they didn't really have much of an opportunity to navigate their interests or to navigate their dreams and for some reason, they just ended up working to have money to, you know, allow us to achieve our dreams, you know? And this makes me sad because I feel like it is a different perspective [on how to live life]. For example, for me, right now, I have different priorities [than my parents]. For me, I don't care about having a lot of money. I am more like, I really want to live in the moment, I really want to have experiences, I like to travel, I like to spend time with the people that I value. For me, time is money. Especially seeing how much time my parents spent working and how much this really drained them, I really don't want to have the same experience [as them]. So, we have a different perspective on how to live life.

I would say that for my parents, especially my dad, but also my mom, one of their biggest dreams was to build a house in Morocco. This is [a dream] I see a lot in the Moroccan diaspora in Italy, but I don't know how it is [for the Moroccan diaspora] in other countries. Even if my parents would not be living there [permanently], yes, we do go to Morocco once a year, and some years even less, but despite this, they really spent a lot of time and money and energy to build this house in Morocco.

And this shows one thing, that they feel that they don't belong here [in Italy] and they want to have a place – at least a metaphorical place they can go back to if things are not going well here. They really need to have a place they can go to if they cannot stay here anymore. This thing is not something that I am thinking or dreaming of. Actually, I am not even dreaming about having a house of mine. It is not one of my top priorities. I am not focusing on having a home somewhere. In part, this is also because I am struggling to see a place as home. If you were to ask me, 'Where would you like to build a house?', I would probably say, 'Close to my parents', but not because I was born there or because I lived most of my life there [in Italy], but just because my parents are there – not because I am connected to the town I was born in in any way. I don't have any connection to it. I go to visit my parents, but there is nothing in that town that makes me say 'Oh, this is home for me' – even if I spent so many years there. There is nothing that makes me say, 'Oh, I would really like to go to this place, because it reminds me of my childhood, and that is quite sad if you think about it.

So, this is a different way of living life compared to our parents and it is something that is really showing up now, because my parents are really like, 'Wow' [surprised] about me and my brother. When we have money, the first thing we think about is travelling or visiting new places. I would say that because I don't really have this sense of home [as a place], or like, a sense of belonging to somewhere, I pursue the feeling of discovering new places, instead. Since I somehow feel detached from every place I stay in, I prefer to, at least, experience the feeling of discovering something new and to make it [this new place] mine, even if only for a short time, but at least I am [then] discovering and embracing it.

Homing Desires and Belonging in the Unbelonging

When reflecting on her parents' "dream" of buying a house in Morocco, Yousra speaks to what Avtar Brah (1996: 177) has labelled a "homing desire", which is "distinct from a desire for a 'homeland'". For some diasporic communities, the 'homeland' (as a geographical territory) exists and remains possible to visit, but the "homing desire" ensues. For instance, Yousra highlights that her family were able to visit Morocco annually when she was growing up. However, Brah (1996: 188) suggests that we understand 'home' as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination",

rather than a tangible, physical place. Instead, the 'home' is an object of desire or a 'travel fantasy' produced in response to "our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging'" or what Nira Yuval-Davis (2016: 368) refers to as "the politics of belonging" (Brah 1996: 189). The politics of belonging differs from the feeling of belonging, insofar as it refers to the political process of drawing boundaries around the political community, distinguishing 'us' from 'them' (Yuval-Davis 2016: 368). This process includes the "hegemonic political powers (within and outside the community)", who draw the boundaries, "but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents" (Yuval-Davis 2016: 368).

Hence, for racialized bodies who are demarcated as un-belonging in white societies, "a metaphorical place to call home", may serve as a psychological shield to the imminent threat that the place (the nation state) they reside in will one day become too hostile to remain resident in. Thus, the diasporic "homing desire" is a symptom and reminder of the racialized "hierarchies of belonging" that dominate and characterize European societies (Brah 1996: 177; Back, Sinha & Bryan 2012: 139).

In Yousra's account, the "homing desire" does not vanish for the *daughter of the ghorba*, but it takes on a character that differs from her parents'. Despite being born and raised in Italy, holding an Italian passport, and residing there her whole life, Yousra does not feel she belongs to the nation-state. Instead, travel has become what Yousra resorts to to clasp at fleeting feelings of home and belonging. Yousra's narrative carries echoes of Sara Ahmed. Ahmed (2000) argues that for the transnational or migrant subject, home is less about the concrete place that the subject comes from, and more about the travel that the subject embarks on to arrive at a potential destination or the intermediary spaces between multiple 'homes', like airports or train stations. As Ahmed (2000: 78) writes,

> the space which is most like home, which is most comfortable and familiar, is not the space of inhabitance – I am here – but the very space in which one finds the self as almost, but not quite, at home.

'Home' is therefore a speculation of the subject's future rather than a testimony of their past (Ahmed 2000: 77-78; Hua 2011: 50-51). For Yousra, the space which is comfortable and 'home-like' is that which can still be discovered and 'claimed' as a temporary home. Ironically, then, the places where fleeting feelings of belonging bloom for Yousra (what she refers to as "*new spaces*") are those in which she is a 'stranger'. Thus, to borrow Sara Ahmed's (2000: 78) words,

> Home is some-where; it is indeed else-where, but it is also where the subject is going. Home becomes the impossibility and necessity of the subject's future (one never gets there, but is always getting there), rather than the past that binds the subject to a given place.'

Yousra's narrative highlights that for those of us, who are daughters of the *ghorba*, the experience of the *ghorba,* itself, can propel travel. By repeatedly seeking the experience of becoming a stranger to "*new places*" (through travel), I suggest that Yousra refuses to be constrained by the systems of power that exclude her from 'belonging' to the Italian nation-state. Instead, she challenges the notion of the 'home' as a static entity that must be associated with the nation-state. For her, 'home'

is relational. It is about the people who welcome her as a whole without expecting her to conform to the nation-state's expectations of "fashion" or "clothing", as she describes.

While the expression of Yousra's "homing desire" differs from those of her parents', her narrative illustrates that the root of the desire is the same. Ultimately, the nation-state places generations of working-class, racialized people at the bottom(s) of hierarchies of belonging, regardless of whether they were born in the country, hold citizenship, and have Italian as their native language.

I suggest that we can begin by understanding the generational difference of this "homing desire" by looking at the *ghorba* as a social condition. While our parents may hold memories and experiences of navigating life before and after the *ghorba* (as place), children of the *ghorba* know no such distinction. We know only fleeting and relational moments of belonging. The *ghorba* is a social condition that we were born into, rather than one we acquired.

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