

CAF Podcast

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María Iglesias

María Iglesias joins the CAF podcast to address the dilemmas and narratives scarring the relationship between the West and migratory phenomena, introducing us to her new novel: Horizonte.

María, in 2019 you published *El Granado de Lesbos*. This novel essay describes, among other things, the institutional violence that the people who crossed the Eastern Mediterranean in search of refuge suffered and still suffer. Horizon was published recently, only on 6 September. Tell us a little about this new novel.

MI: This is my third novel. The first was *Lazos de Humo* (2011), set at the end of the 19th century, about a boy emigrating from Cantabria to southern Spain. *El Granado de Lesbos* I consider a non-fiction novel where, as you say, I talked about the humanitarian emergency of refugees on the run, mainly from the Syrian war 2015-2016. The third one, *Horizon*, is about the case of a Cameroonian boy who comes to Europe and is based on the actual case of Sami Ladan, the author of *The Moon Is in Douala*, whom I interviewed in 2018 and who has become a great friend. From the impact of interviewing him and how he told me about a new generation of Africans, today's youth, who are determined to make a definitive push for equality with the white western north with Europe, I create this literary fiction where, effectively, I also resort to the symbolism of a bridge between us, between both shores of the Strait of Gibraltar. In fact, there has been a real bridge, or tunnel, in the pipeline since the beginning of democracy in Spain. An agreement was signed three days after the Tejero coup d'état between Juan Carlos I of Spain and Hassan II of Morocco, also signed by President Suárez, to explore this technical engineering possibility. This project is still active through an entity called SECEGSA, which depends on the Spanish Ministry of Transport with its annual budget and its personnel... However, so far, there has been no sign of any real work being carried out, unlike what has happened with projects that were carried out at the same time, such as the Euro Channel Tunnel.

Are we talking about a permanent project in permanent re-evaluation, and yet it has not taken shape and has not had permanent funding since the beginning of the Spanish democracy?

MI: Indeed, it is quite surprising. In all my interviews and public appearances, I always encourage those who listen to me to google SECEGSA because it is shocking to find the information on its official website, to see all the infographics that have been made, and to see a lot of data. Even the physical headquarters that is in front of the Retiro Park is very stately... it is something

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that is not secret; it is something that is camouflaged, perhaps because the acronym is very unpronounceable or also because they usually speak of a fixed link on the strait instead of a bridge or tunnel, which sounds rather vague... I am surprised that no one from the agency has yet appeared to give a public statement. But just at the end of August - beginning of September, the current director of the organisation, who interestingly also happens to be a military officer, wrote a letter in a magazine then echoed by Eldiario.es, asking for the collaboration of private-public funding to give it all a new impetus. And just today, I have seen information online saying that this new impetus would be linked to the organisation of the Football World Cup, where both Spain and Morocco are organisers in the year 2030. I don't know. For the moment, it has been many years without a fixed and tangible project.

It would be interesting to ask ourselves whether, given the political circumstances, rather than the World Cup, this initiative has more to do with the free movement of goods than with people. It is an issue that we have often addressed: how human mobility is increasingly constrained while we pretend that mobility is absolute for goods and capital transfers.

MI: Sure, of course. The novel starts from that double pillar, almost like a bridge itself. There are two pillars. On the one hand, there is the personal story of Ketu Simo, who is my protagonist, who leaves Cameroon, not fleeing from war or hunger, but because he wins a scholarship and corruption in Cameroon means that they take it away from him and give it to the son of a high official. He, a very bright person with many aspirations, begins his journey and ends up fleeing Boko Haram, crossing the Sahara, where a friend of his dies, swimming across from Fnidreq to Ceuta. Once he arrived in Spain, with a lot of effort and some help, he managed to resume his studies and start a career in international relations and diplomacy. That would be one of the pillars. The other pillar is the one that has to do with the bridge infrastructure project that he discovered. What I found very inspiring was to think that you, on discovering this project, decided with a group of allies, of friends of this new African generation, professional engineers of very different ranks, to relaunch this project but in the service of African interests and to say, "Obviously, the Western group is looking for a new project: Obviously the Western group is seeking with this infrastructure to plunder us more, better, more comfortably, more cheaply; but we are the owners of the resources and what we want here is to promote a new social contract, to put an end to this plundering, to establish fair and equitable trade relations, starting with reciprocity, with our right to mobility. In other words, "Why can't we Africans travel to Europe under the same conditions as Europeans come to Africa? And this is what the novel is built on, and it is also intended to be surprising for the reader. It is written in the present indicative so that one never knows what is going to happen, whether the protagonists are going to succeed or fail in this daring attempt to launch a possible alternative. I believe that the great stumbling block we have in international relations is that we progressive forces have imbued ourselves with an inferiority complex that makes it seem that the status quo is immovable. Nobody is happy; nobody is satisfied. Devouring capitalism makes life impossible for the Global South and every day also for more and more layers in the privileged corners of the North. But it seems that it is impossible to dream of alternatives. The disrepute of Utopias is totally strategic: by failing to dream of possible worlds, we cannot move forward, nor can we get closer to any of them. And it is against this that you try, with all modesty and humility, but also with all your illusion and energy and power, to confront this novel, Horizonte.

I am particularly interested in your proposal that highlights Pan-Africanism. I agree with you: if there is no crisis of political imagination, there is a crisis of hope. We seem to lack not only the necessary vision to change our

institutions but also the vision to believe that it is merely possible. And yes, this is something that the narratives that sustain these institutions have arguably taken care of themselves. This is true for us Westerners who supposedly live with the promise of political integration, of being “included” in the decision-making processes of our countries, etc. But this curse of inaction in our own eyes becomes so much worse when we try to think about political and citizen action in Africa. We don’t understand, and we don’t want to see the different dynamics they are subject to and the transformations they are, in fact, already spearheading.

MI: Of course. A fundamental purpose of the novel is to invite readers to take the journey of discovery that I have taken since I interviewed Sami Ladan in November 2018. In that interview, he told me that with the best of intentions, a mistake we journalists, activists, and sometimes migrants themselves make is to focus on drama and tragedy. They are true, and, of course, they must be denounced, but they overshadow everything else because, with them, we are left with victimisation. He told me that this prevents them from being seen and from seeing themselves as political subjects of change, which is what they are, what they want to be and what holds the seed of hope and transformation. Since 2018, I have been observing in my ever-increasing research into African realities (which are multiple because there are 55 countries) that there is indeed this movement of generations (very young, bearing in mind that the average age on the continent is 18 compared to the European average, which is 40) that are on the move. To begin with, to put an end to neo-colonialism, which is something that has been maintained since the end of the colonies in the 1960s. And then, for themselves, to promote better, more democratic processes of representation, more in line with what their societies deserve and need, given their population and the resources they have. In other words, to get rid of those puppet leaders protected by Europe, who promote agreements that suit Europe and keep them and their court cliques with succulent crumbs, while the people have no hope of development and cannot emigrate because the visa policy is a deadly trap in which they are asked for enormous sums of money and then systematically denied them. All this reality of change in Africa exists. What is happening is that it is not being seen on this western European shore. It is not being seen because the political and economic powers do not want us to see it because they want to stifle it. On the other hand, the media, for example, have very few correspondents in such a vast and extensive continent, which means that very little information reaches us, which is very biased and, therefore, not trustworthy. So now, in the last three years, we have been surprised by this chain of what we call coups d’état in West Africa, in Conakry, in Mali, in Burkina Faso, in Niger? And on the other hand, they are experiencing it as liberation insurrections. Not everyone, of course, but the majority of the population is not horrified by this but is experiencing it as a change, a movement. They are also looking for new partners on the international chessboard through the BRICS, but also through China and through Russia. This is something that leads many people in the West to say that they are not aware of the danger because Russia and China are pursuing their interests—such a paternalistic stance when you think of it. Of course, they are aware that all actors pursue their interests, but they want to have a plurality of potential partners, or as we have in the West, we also reached agreements with China, and until the day before yesterday, before the war, we took them to Ukraine with Russia. They want to be able to have that plurality in order to be able to negotiate better with their raw materials, their labour force, and their interests, like everything else on the global chessboard. All of this is largely unknown here, but there is a lot of movement. This Urgence Panafricaniste, which inspired me for the African Awakening Movement in my novel, as well as France Degáge, there’s Balai Citoyen... There is a lot of movement, and for example, Senegal right now is an example of civil resistance to the autocratic drift of President Macky Sall, who has locked up Ousmane Sonko in prison, the third opponent who has removed himself from the race for the 2024 presidential elections by disqualifying

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his party, the Pastef. All of this is something that we hear little about in the Western world but which, in the African context, is well known, and I think they are shocked by our level of ignorance, given all the possibilities that they and we have today, through new technologies, which make them very aware of the world in which we live and very determined that this news of centuries of North-South treatment should come to an end.

Going back a little bit to the image of victimisation, which is also what the progressive forces here are guilty of, I don't know if from that paternalism that seems to be inherent in the Western philosophy of liberation, but also going back to the idea of seeing these people as the political subjects of change that they already are. Don't you think that there is an effort to conceal both narratives? Recently, we saw that, as usually happens in October, what is called the Atlantic Route or Canary Route, which sees the arrival of rafts and canoes to the archipelago, has been reactivated. This has also reactivated the usual media alarms and the supposed collapse of the media, etc. For those listeners who do not know, we are talking about a route in which the boats, which are very fragile, cross the Atlantic Ocean from places as far away as Senegal or Gambia, generally with much less fuel and provisions than the journey requires. We don't even know the actual number of lives lost at sea, but the numbers we suspect are disheartening. The day before yesterday, RTVE 24h gave names and surnames to some of these people. They arrived mainly from Senegal and made no mention of the extreme conditions of their journey, reducing their motivations to the fact that in their country, there were, and I quote, "political problems and demonstrations". We have both the disappearance of the regional transformation component and the disappearance of the recognition of the motivation and the extreme characteristics of the journey. This concerns me because if we want to change in Europe, a critical mass that understands the conditions of a post-colonial Africa designed by Western forces to be strategically unstable is essential. What do we do in the face of a social narrative that does not want migrants but is shocked by the spending on cooperation that tries to contribute to making inhabitable regions that are becoming less and less so? All this is when we no longer tell stories of victimisation, but neither do we tell stories of hope.

MI: On the one hand, it is true that we must always refocus and centre the issue, bearing in mind that the arrivals of small boats are terrifying and that we must, of course, show them in order to put an end to this form of migration, knowing that the only way to do so will be to achieve a policy of reciprocity in the freedom to travel. Africans cannot travel on a plane, paying the cost of a flight that is much less than that of any of these suicide boats. We are talking about a global policy of a racist order because they are black and African, and we are white and European. That said, this proportion of pateras is minimal in the overall migration in Spain, which is eminently a migration by plane. And that is why the main migration contingents in our country are Latin American, and we cannot lose sight of that. Approximately 60% of Spanish migrants are Latin American, who come by plane with their three-month visas and then stay without any problem... The labour market absorbs it perfectly well because there is work available for it. The proportion of those who come by boat, which is around 1%, is not a problem for the labour market in Spain. Neither in Spain nor in Europe. We must repeat this because sometimes when we talk about how tragic and how hard it is, we lose that perspective. Another issue is that migration from Africa does not arise from African poverty, African wars, or from African famines. It arises from African wealth. If Africa were not a continent rich in the natural energy resources it has, it would not be subjected to the systematic plunder it is today and, therefore, would not be driven to seek to trace its assets. When Senegalese fishermen are coming here now, of course, they are coming because of the political harassment against all those who

As we know from the feminist struggle, in the context of oppression, it is the oppressed who liberate themselves. The dominator never surrenders his privilege. The Global South, especially Africa, knows that it cannot entrust its liberation and the conquest of equality to a pledge that is progressive yet Western, European and white.

have wanted political change in their country, personified by Sonko and the Pastef party. But they are also coming because they are eminently fishermen in the same boats they come in, the cayucos. And because the EU-Senegal trade agreements (trade agreements between the 27 partners on the one hand and a single African country on the other, with the presupposed imbalance) allow our European boats to fish off the Senegalese coast, with the technology of our fleets as opposed to the technology of these wooden dugout canoes. In this way, we are destroying the Senegalese fishing grounds, and when they go to do their traditional fishing, they have nothing to feed their families. The source of their exodus is their wealth. On the other hand, when you ask yourself if we want to change the narratives regarding migration in Europe, we must ask ourselves the same question: do we want to change the narrative regarding migration in Europe? I'd question it because since 2014-2015, we have seen a clearly structured and designed phenomenon, decided to use the stigmatisation of migrants (as in the 1940s, the stigmatisation of the Jewish people was used) and to promote the rise to power of neo-fascism and the global far right. So, I can understand the extreme right doing this because it is working for them. It worked for them in the 1940s, and it is working for them again now. What I cannot understand is that the democratic political forces, of course, the progressive left, but also the democrats on the right, are allowing themselves to be dragged into this senseless spiral as they are. Of course, it violates international law, and of course, it is unethical, but it is also strategically disastrous for the future of democracies in Europe and in the world. This policy of walls, fences, concertinas, fear of migrants, portraying them as the enemy? Because all of this does nothing more than fatten up the extreme right. At the present time, I see four "horsemen of the Apocalypse": on the one hand, there is obviously the global escalation of war, with the worsening of the situation between Israel and Palestine as a result of all this escalation, the attacks by Hamas, the oppression of the Gaza Strip by Israel, even though we had already seen the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. The second is the continuing massacre of immigrants. The third is the global climate disaster. And the fourth is the global rise of the most savage ultra-right. Faced with these four horsemen of the apocalypse, progressive democratic forces must necessarily develop their own strategy of alternatives. And they must not delay in doing so because we are already feeling the effects of all these four dangers combined. And they are clearly leading us, as we know, because history shows us, to collapse. And I believe that all creative, intellectual, professional, vital, civic and activist energies must converge to generate these new alternatives. The novel is effectively committed to this because the protagonists dedicate themselves to generating this synergy and these bridges of collaboration and friendship, even love, between them. And I myself try to make the book a bridge between civil society and the readers so that we can continue it in real life.

Of course. And when I talked about critical mass for the idea of migration, I was talking precisely about civil society and those of us who view this pattern that you draw with concern. And yet, almost the most worrying thing is that these notions come from bodies that, like the European one, already have more of a technocratic character than anything else. In Spain, we have seen how polarisation can destroy even the oldest, most established political consensus. But with bodies such as the European Union, the opposite seems to happen, which is that the narrative is naturalised through management. I wonder how we can fight against this institutionalisation, against these institutions, from societies that are increasingly anaesthetised, not only with respect to the living conditions of other human beings but also with respect to our own historical responsibilities

MI: Well, I'm going to give you the answer that Sani Ladan 2018 gave me, which is the germ of this novel Horizonte and its protagonist, Ketu Simo. We don't have



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to do it, the white West doesn't have to do it, we Europeans don't have to do it. Africans are going to do it and are doing it because that is also a defect that we have, putting ourselves at the centre of actions, narratives and everything. We are not the centre, ladies and gentlemen. There is an enormous world beyond the West and Europeans. And indeed, in the phenomena of oppression, it is the oppressed who liberate themselves. The dominator never surrenders his privilege. And this is something that we can understand very well also in the European context, in the dynamics of feminism and sexist machismo. It is we women who have initiated the process and are fighting the battle (and I am convinced that there is no turning back, that the macho oppression is over) for their own sake. Of course, if along the way we find allies, as we do, comrades, men of our time who are feminists themselves, that's great; they are welcome to the movement. But we cannot rely on men for women's liberation to happen. The Global South, especially Africa, knows that it cannot entrust its liberation and the conquest of equality to a pledge that is progressive yet Western, European and white. It is something that they are actively promoting, according to their interests and their national dynamics in different countries as well. This is something that can be seen perfectly in the novel; the protagonist is African. This new horizon is being built by Africa, because it is the main interested party, the oppressed and the crushed. For me, what has been interesting over the years has been to see it, to realise it, for the blindfold to fall off. And that is the proposal that I make to everyone through the book: to look out because nowadays, we can attend many online conferences of young activists of professionals from this urban Africa that we don't see here on our continent either. We always show the villages. The shacks are a part of reality, just as they are so in many small villages in Spain with small populations and with even fewer resources and infrastructures (though on a different scale). But of course, there are the large megalopolies, which you see in the novel, in South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, and all those professionals and universities, those hotbeds of ideas, and proposals, analysis that exist, with which I have been in contact, often through CAF. There are people like the Nigerian lawyer, Ayo Obe, or Pierre Sané, a Senegalese Director General of Amnesty International, whom I have met in the world of CAF. It is they, in their societies, in their circles, in their movements, who are driving progress, change, a different and empowered Africa, and who are going to propose a new social contract. How long will it take us to realise this? What will the cost of this delay be along the way? Well, that's something that needs to be considered. And, of course, what we talked about earlier in a previous question. It is very interesting to develop a North-South axis of trade and relations when, for example, China and Russia are so interested in an East-West axis. Now that even the melting of the polar ice capes seems to be opening new opportunities, threshold countries like Spain should be much more interested in establishing commercial, cultural, personal, social and all kinds of relations with our closest neighbour, which is Africa. There is also an interesting element that I believe is sparsely addressed and yet an internal dilemma of the continent: arbitrating a functional unity, a good synergy between sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. Europe and the West tend to have the Maghreb play the bad cop, preventing the departure and migration of sub-Saharan Africans when so many people from Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia are themselves migrating in boats. Many sub-Saharan migrants testify that their first encounter with violence and racism is in the Maghreb, which is particularly painful for them as their African compatriots. They will need to build this unity together because it will be crucial in facing Europe.