
Odyssey of oblivion: a chronicle of displacement from the Kerkennah Islands

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*Was not the earth of God spacious enough
for you to emigrate therein?*¹

Since 2020, I have frequented Kerkennah Islands – my mother’s homeland – to document illegal migrants’ attempts to reach Europe and follow the traces of their journeys. As destitution drove migrants to a distant shore, the archipelago became a harbour for human trafficking and corpses tainted its beaches with the stench of death.²

The Kerkennah Islands

The Kerkennah Islands, located off the coast of Tunisia, have gained notoriety as a transit point for illegal immigration. African migrants converge here, united in the pursuit of a better life in Italy or Malta along the Central Mediterranean route (CMR).³ The CMR

1 Quran. ‘Surah An-Nisa [The Women] 4:97’, in *The Qu’ran: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meaning*, ed. and trans. Saheeh International (1997).

2 For more on this tragic pattern, see ‘Four bodies recovered off Tunisia following migrant boat accident’, 2022, accessed 15 May 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/45687/four-bodies-recovered-off-tunisia-following-migrant-boat-accident>; ‘Tunisia: Navy recovers seven bodies from Mediterranean Sea’, 2023, accessed 15 May 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/51170/tunisia-navy-recovers-seven-bodies-from-mediterranean-sea>; ‘Tunisia recovers around 210 bodies of migrants’, 2023, accessed 15 May 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/48625/tunisia-recovers-around-210-bodies-of-migrants>.

3 Liska Wittenberg, *Managing Mixed Migration: The Central Mediterranean Route to Europe* (New York: International Peace Institute 2017).

claims hundreds of lives each year, accounting for more than 90 per cent of deaths in the Mediterranean in 2016.⁴ Tunisia is bearing the brunt of this tragedy, with 729 deaths in 2023. The majority of which occurred off the coasts of Sfax (349) and Kerkennah (140).⁵

A different view on migration

Being from the island, it has always held a primal allure for me. I envision it as a place of genesis where generations of mothers reach back to the source: the first mother and universal woman. Instinctively, the only compelling commentary on what was taking place on its shores lay in the voices and experiences of women.

And while the hardship of the crossing is shared by all who attempt it, the gender-based vulnerability makes it riskier for women, who make up half the world's refugees and are disproportionately susceptible to abuse. UN statistics reveal that 60 per cent of preventable maternal deaths occur in humanitarian settings, and an estimated one in five refugee or displaced women have endured sexual violence.⁶

Personal narratives in the form of documentary photography have helped tackle migration issues. Images of people with distinct names and faces, crying mothers in the chaos of capsized vessels and lifeless babies washing ashore next to striped parasols are potent tools for fundraising and policy-reform appeals. But is there a different approach in the same medium, one that would resonate with equal force? My work explores the narratives beyond immediate emotional effects. The focus shifts from 'the displaced woman' as a singular entity to the concept of displacement and how women actually experience it. These faceless figures embody the collective experience, and the lack of identification reflects the marginalisation that migrants face as their identities are replaced with the 'Migrant Persona'.

Imperfections as narrative

Analogue photography is the medium that gives this project its voice. Shot primarily in the Kerkennah Islands, the work embraces the imperfections inherent in 35mm film. Scratches, light leaks, missing frames, faded hues and occasional blurs all complement the themes of absence that permeate the narrative.

4 'Tunisia's Kerkennah Islands: A land for smuggling', *The New Arab*, 2018, accessed 2 June 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/tunisia-kerkennah-islands-land-smuggling>.

5 Riman Abouelhassan, *Middle East and North Africa: Migrants Deaths [sic] and Disappearances in 2023*, (United Nations Migration, IOM, 2024).

6 'Women refugees and migrants', UN Women, accessed 30 June 2024, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-refugees-and-migrants>.



Further amplifying this concept are deliberate technical and chemical manipulations. Double and triple exposures, premature stops, bleaching, burning, etc. emphasise erosion and erasure, implying a sense of discontinuity. This exploration extends beyond the captured image. Collage and textual footnotes are also visual elements suggesting that absences define the Mediterranean as a fluid border.

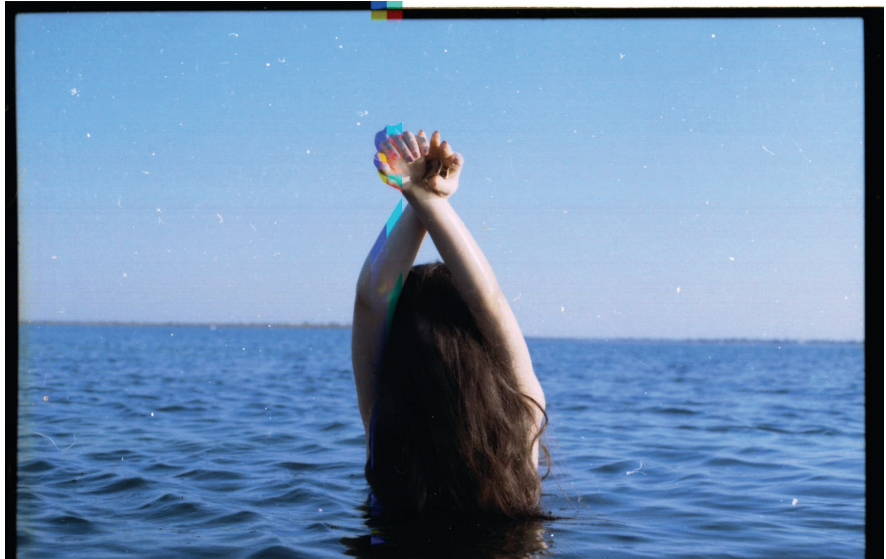
My aim is to transcend mere documentation, for it is insufficient to understand the psychological complexities of flight. I aspire to unveil and reimagine the feminine migration journey from the islands where I took the photographs. In four chapters, each echoing a specific location, emotional state and pivotal step in this odyssey, the narrative unfolds in a linear fashion, mimicking a traveller's physical journey. A fixed point of departure contrasts with the open-ended unknown in every clandestine voyage.

Chapter 1 LAND: SCENES FROM THE ISLAND

The first chapter depicts the point of departure. Earthy tones dominate the scenes, evoking a sense of connection to one's roots. These are not the perfect vistas commonly associated with Kerkennah, the vibrant tourist destination. Instead, the focus shifts to the marginalised scenery, easily overlooked by those seeking the allure of orange sunsets and glistening waters. Here, amidst the seemingly ordinary, lies the hidden face of the place that bears the invisible scars of human exodus.

Vast, empty and abandoned spaces (figure 1) symbolise the vacancy that coexists with the buzz on the island. They underscore the duality of presence and absence, the actual scarcity and perceived abun-

Fig. 1
Rim Hermessi: *Abandoned car*,
Kerkennah (2020)
35mm colour film, digital scan



dance, and reflect the substitution of the land's fertility with aridity.

Double and triple exposures (figure 2) are visual metaphors to convey coexisting yet contrasting realities. The serene island life, steeped in tradition and governed by the quotidian rhythms, contrast with the 'criminal' world that emerges mainly after dark.

Any sense of belonging is fleeting, a mirage shimmering in the desert. The land offers no solace, no promise of a future. This chapter serves not as a haven but as a crucible to steel travellers for the journey.

Chapter 2

WATER: FIRST CONTACT WITH THE MEDITERRANEAN

The second chapter explores what it means to be a woman on such a journey. This overflows with a feminine presence. The concept of vessel-like entities is explored through the philosophy

Fig. 2
Rim Hermessi: *Shore, Kerkennah*
(2021)
35mm colour film, digital scan

Fig. 3
Rim Hermessi: *Woman chained,*
Kerkennah (2021)
35mm colour film, digital scan



of inner and outer spaces. The outward journey is mirrored by the physical vessel, the ship, braving the elements. The inward journey is embodied by the female form, a vessel carrying the weight of the unknown (figure 3). Both journeys converge towards a shared destination.

I have further manipulated some film. Bleaching, for example, dissolves colour so that the bleached area appears white in the negative and black in the print (figure 4). This erasure reinforces the theme of absence, exploring the transit from a place where the migrant was once present to a void through a visual metaphor for disappearance. Infiltrating a new space blends into the act of vanishing from the old one. The profound loss created by these journeys is often overlooked. The physical absence from one's home, the replacement of familiarity with fear and estrangement, the emotional void left behind for loved ones and the silencing of the harrowing migrant experiences all add another layer of absence. Migration itself becomes a catalyst for absence, the severing of ties to surroundings and social connections is a journey into a liminal space, a state of being neither here nor there. The origin leaves an echo in memory even after physical departure. It is not merely a geographic point but a nexus of experiences, emotions and histories.

While tension and anxiety permeate this chapter, the island is not as gloomy as the journey would suggest. Those not compelled to

Fig. 4
Rim Hermessi: *Bleached away*,
Kerkennah (2021)
35mm colour film, digital scan (Post
processing: bleaching of the negative)

Fig. 5
Rim Hermessi: *Postcard series*,
Kerkennah (2021), 35mm colour film,
digital scan



escape experience its vibrancy and charm with postcard-worthy sunsets and sunrises (figure 5).

Not all enjoy that luxury. Postcolonial conditions, exploitation and discriminatory migration policies condemn entire regions to cycles of poverty and deprivation. For many women, the island could never be anything more than a sojourn. Philosophical meditations on absence take on a new dimension when juxtaposed with the harsh reality of the Mediterranean as a colonial sea.⁷ Gaps and voids are geo-politically relevant, defining the experience of those who traverse it.

Chapter 3 **PILGRIMAGE: THE JOURNEY WITHIN AND AT SEA**

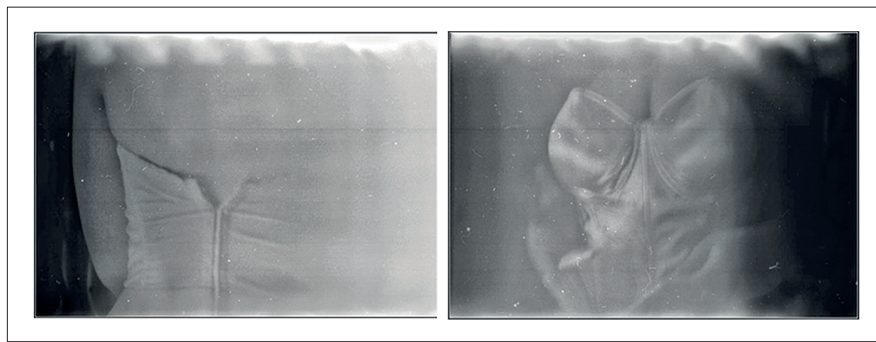
Traversing the central Mediterranean can take several days. This section examines the heart of the voyage. Fully in black and white, it reflects the sacred nature of this transformation as a testament of faith and resilience. Each soul will emerge renewed, irrevocably altered and absolved.

Black-and-white photography detaches itself from reality by stripping away vibrant hues, and it feels surreal because we experience the world in colour. But in this narrative, such detachment is necessary for the metaphor to sink in. We witness not the singular struggle of one migrant, nor a solitary woman's plight. Instead, this chapter is about a cluster of migrant women from several backgrounds aiming at the same end. Therefore, we must transcend individual journeys, aiming instead for a global phenomenon encompassing the full range of roles women play from daughter to mother and everything in between (figure 6).

The narrative embraces intentional light leaks while

Fig. 6
**Rim Hermessi: *Mother and Son* (2022),
Black & white 35 mm film, digital scan**

⁷ M. Borutta, & S. Gekas, 'A Colonial Sea: the Mediterranean', 1798–1956. *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* (2012).



photographing, mimicking water effects (figure 7). Fragmented portrayals of the female form are deliberate, as their sum may allow reconstruction of the body that once left the shore.

The experience and the tragedy remain obscure from the outside, but we yet hope that the vessels reach their destination whole (figure 8).

Fig. 7
Rim Hermessi: *Parts of a sum* (2021), Black & white 35 mm film. Intentional light leaks, digital scan (in-camera processing, light leaking).

Fig. 8
Rim Hermessi: *Sum of parts* (2021), Black & white 35 mm film. Intentional light leaks, digital scan (in-camera processing, light leaking).



Fig. 9
**Rim Hermessi: *Blouse on shore*,
 Kerkennah (2021), 35mm colour film,
 digital scan.**

Fig. 10
**Rim Hermessi: *Gaze* (2022), 35mm
 colour film, digital scan.**

Chapter 4 **THE GREAT BEYOND: ARRIVAL OR LACK THEREOF**

The seemingly straightforward concept of arrival gains complexity on this trip. What does this hard-won destination signify for the individual? And for those lost at sea, claimed by the fear that haunted their journey, arrival is a grim fulfilment of prophecy. How do the adventurer and the observer grasp this notion (figure 9)?

From the European perspective, the Mediterranean remains a

frontier, a line dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’.⁸ Eurocentric narratives paint the region with a broad brush, privileging the protection-worthy global North over the struggling South. This fosters not only the erasure of entire cultures through continued colonial marginalisation, but also a stark dichotomy in the perception of the same absence, referring to the migrants’ absence as well as that of the destination’s inhabitants.

Even in the celebrated kind of arrival, a disquieting truth lingers. Crossing this fluid border disorients identity, expanding beyond measure the emotional rift caused by the severance of intimate ties with land, people and perhaps life itself (Fig. 10).

This project began as a personal odyssey, a quest to grasp the complexities of womanhood, the trauma of displacement and the resilience of the migrant spirit. I sought to illuminate, through the lens of femininity, secret journeys across the Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 11). Ultimately, however, the exploration raised more questions than answers.

Yet a single question persists. And it is essential. And it is relentless: Where did she go? And what should we do about it?

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8 Michael A. Kozakowski, ‘Making “Mediterranean Migrants”: Geopolitical Transitions, Migratory Policy, and French Conceptions of the Mediterranean in the 20th Century’, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 89 (2014) <https://doi.org/10.4000/cdlm.7776>.