

El cuarto de atras: martin gaité

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Assess how Martin Gaité takes on the task of confronting recent history both aesthetically and ethically in *El cuarto de atrás*. *El cuarto de atrás* is Carmen Martín Gaité's first post-Franco novel. Encompassing two very distinct genres, it is a fantastical novel, whilst in the same framework, a realist memoir of a woman growing up in post-war Spain. Through the use of the fantastic mode, the author approaches the real social history of the Civil War and post war period.

This essay, will explore how Martin Gaité confronts this recent history, illustrating the hostile political environment of her youth and the anxiety it engendered. Through aesthetic techniques, particularly the fantastic mode, the novel facilitates a recollection of memories, which for many, were tarred with pain and anger. What we discover is that Martin Gaité's intended purpose for her novel is not direct criticism of the fascist regime, but rather she aims to capture the collective memory of a generation, a memory which is often difficult to yield.

To begin, it necessary to understand Martin Gaité's decision to write her novel in this way, by gaining a sense of the climate of opinion which prevailed among the leading writers at the end of Franco's rule, the time when Martin Gaité wrote *El cuarto de atrás*. One of her contemporaries, the influential Juan Goytisolo, published an essay in 1967, which criticises the insipid realistic literature that was written in post-war Spain. He warns that Spanish novelists seem to have lost the ability to smile, despite belonging to a literary tradition that can draw on Cervantes and Larra.

Goytisolo claims that, preoccupied with fighting Franco with words, he and his contemporaries have failed to serve either their cause or the wider

interests of literature itself. In his essay, he writes: Digamoslo con claridad: las generaciones venideras nos pedirán cuentas, sin duda, de nuestra actual conducta cívica, pero no tomarán a esta en consideración si, paralelamente a nuestra responsabilidad moral de ciudadanos, no manifestamos nuestra responsabilidad artística como escritores.

No basta, en efecto, reclamar la libertad: tenemos que probarla desde ahora con la autenticidad y responsabilidad de nuestras obras (Wood 2012: 48).

Martin Gaité acknowledged and responded to this need for a new form of literature that did not rely solely on politics and realism. On November 23, 1975, the day that Franco died, she set out to write *El cuarto de atrás*. Her novel would focus on two main literary goals; Firstly, to write a social history of the post-war era and secondly to write a fantastic novel.

The novel is narrated by a woman called 'C', similar to Martin Gaité herself, who tells the story of an unexpected visit by a mysterious man, in the middle of the night. He has come to interview her. During their night-long conversation, the interviewer encourages the narrator in her recollection of her past. During the course of the conversation, the two protagonists notice that in the corner of the room, there is a pile of papers, which continues to grow. At the end of the novel, we learn that this stack of pages comprises the novel itself, even entitled 'El cuarto de atrás'.

Their conversation has produced a novel. This powerful metafictional image of the written manuscript of the novel appearing within the novel itself creates a sense of participation amongst her readers. In the final pages, when the protagonist picks up the manuscript, we suddenly become aware of the novel we hold in our hands, and see it now as a mere artefact, the

product of the conversation to which we have been aesthetically participating. The mystery behind this metafiction helps in establishing the 'fantastic' genre of the novel.

Todorov gives a three-part definition of the fantastic genre, all three met in *El cuarto de atrás*, 'the reader considers the fictional world as real, the reader and the narrator share a hesitation over whether or not what they perceive derives from commonly-held definitions of reality, and no allegorical interpretation of the unexplainable is advanced' (Brown 1987: 41). Throughout the novel, the narrator mentions Todorov and quotes several times from his works. The narrator literally stumbles over Todorov's book at the very start of the novel and later on, she spills water on the book, in doing so, making it more real.

She even comes across a note she made when finishing reading the book, promising that one day 'voy a escribir una novela fantástica' (p 27). By the end of the novel, when she picks up the manuscript entitled 'El cuarto de atrás', we realise that this is in fact, the fantastic novel which she promised she would write. The following description constructed by Todorov himself indicates why Martin Gaité decided to use the fantastic mode in her novel: 'The supernatural thereby becomes a symbol of language, just as the figures of rhetoric do, and the figure is, as we have seen, the purest form of literality' (Brown 1987: 153).

As well as heightening the creativity of her realist memoirs, Martin Gaité depends on the fantastic genre to uncover certain truths, which lie in hidden memories. Explaining, 'cuando se traspasa esa frontera entre lo que estas convencido de que es verdad y lo que ya sabes si es verdad o mentira,

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puede ser posible todo'[1], it is apparent that in using the fantastic, mixing reality with mystery, she makes possible the difficult task of confronting painful, distressing memories experienced during the Civil war in Spain. The fantastic genre of *El cuarto de atrás* is actually determined by the interviewer, the "man in the black hat".

The mystery of this nocturnal visitor remains unresolved and we finish the novel not knowing if his visit was real or dreamt-up by the narrator. From his very arrival, a fantastic apparition materialises, with the huge cockroach on the stairway, whose eyes, she will later note, exactly resemble his. 'With its monstrous appearance [...] the insect summons the reader to anticipate the unknown. While the insect is described in detail, the man whose entry follows is not' (Brown 1987: 151). The absent description of this character is one of several unresolved ambiguities of the novel, taking us in to the territory of the fantastic.

It is in this territory and through her conversation with this ghostly character, that the narrator is able to recall her memories. The narrator realises that her difficulty in writing the memoir was due to the fact that she wanted to recapture more than just facts, 'lo que yo queria rescatar era algo mas inaprensible, eran las miguitas, no las piedrecitas blancas' (p. 120). With the image of white pebbles and breadcrumbs, a symbol from Perrault's stories, we learn that she grasps how the truth about history, identity and collective memory, is made up of fragments, like pieces of a puzzle.

Acting as her conscience, the interviewer certifies this in saying 'tendria que aprender a escribir como habla' (p. 120). This reflects Martin Gaité's view that historical narrative does not suffice if and when constructing a novel

which successfully approaches such a painful past. For the narrator, rather than assisting her, facts and historical data have acted as an obstacle. Martin Gaité creates a fantastic memoir, with dimensions of both reality and mystery, allowing the readers to find some form of escapism in her novel. As Robert C.

Spires notes, the fantastic ' frees both writer and reader from a one-dimensional, cause and effect, view of existence' (1984: 120). This creative release, which Martin Gaité seeks in her employment of the fantastic, hints at Spain's sudden release from the Franco regime. In a further metafictional reference, the narrator explains how, since her childhood, she has experienced a form of escape through literature and fantasy. In her composition, as a child, of a novel revolving around a mythical island called Bergai, she demonstrates her desire to escape the strict silence of the regime.

By declaring her own search for freedom through literature, Martin Gaité hopes that her novel will encourage the freeing of unspoken memories that her own generation has been hiding. The very title of the novel and the plurality of its meaning, indicates Martin Gaité's desire to liberate memories. The narrator recalls how, ' El cuarto de atrás' was the place where she used to play as a child, enjoying its freedom to develop her creative imagination. With the war, ' el cuarto de atrás' begins to be appropriated by adults to store ' artículos de primera necesidad' (p. 157).

The narrator explains, ' hasta que dejamos de tener cuarto para jugar, porque los artículos de primera necesidad desplazaron y arrinconaron nuestra infancia, el juego y la subsistencia coexistieron en una convivencia

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agria de olores incompatibles' (p. 160). ' Politics seemed to be part of the adult world and the changes brought about by war seemed like rules for an unexplained new game' (O'leary and Ribeiro de Menezes 2008: 114). Her description reveals her imagination, yet at the same time, serves to depict the ways in which the war impeded on such basic aspects of everyday life.

Through her innocence as a child, she does not politically criticise the war, but instead, discusses its inconveniences on her life as she grew up. The plurality of meaning that surrounds ' El cuarto de atrás' surfaces in a further description of this space: ' me lo imagino tambien como un desvan del cerebro [...] separado [...] por una cortina que solo se descorre de vez en cuando; los recuerdos que pueden darnos alguna sorpresa viven agazapados en el cuarto de atrás, siempre salen de alli, y solo cuando quieren, no sirve hostigarlos" (p. 83).

In the novel, the task of pulling back the curtain is undertaken by the interviewer, as it can be perceived that his role is to help the narrator reveal hidden memories. This task of confronting past experiences is not an easy one, as it can un-surface deep fear and anger. ' It must be remembered that government repression was a formalised expression of the psychological mechanisms adopted by a people whose horror had to be assuaged' (Brown 1987: 162). In establishing the mode of the fantastic, Martin Gaité pulls back the curtain on past realities, and in doing so, captures collective memory.

The novel gives a realistic account of life as a child growing up in Spain in 1930's and 40's. The narrator points out that Franco came to power when she was only nine years old and she speaks openly about the effects the Civil War had on her. She recalls personal experiences such as her uncle's murder

because he was a Socialist and the imprisonment of her friend's parents because they were 'Rojos'. Her recollections originate from her perception of them as a child, for example, trips to the bomb shelter are just another game.

This innocence and political ignorance of her childhood memories help Martin Gaité to steer away from the blame game and political motives, giving instead, an account of what she experienced and how she perceived things as a child. The compelling image which most effectively achieves this is that of Franco's daughter. The narrator remembers envying her but also feeling sorry for her. We see her sympathising with Carmencita's grief as a daughter during the dictator's funeral. Stating that 'en mi casa, no eran franquistas', we learn that the narrator is subtle when probed on Franco himself.

Although critique on his leadership is inevitable, she avoids using her novel to directly attack Franco, but rather to give an account of the effect of his dominance on society. As she watches Carmencita Franco at her father's funeral, the narrator thinks about what they have in common and realises that they share the same collective memory as women who grew up in a patriarchal society. The novel explores the importance of the 'Sección Femenina' and of romantic fiction to her generation of women. Martin Gaité offers the reader an insight, often overlooked in history books, into the ideological inculcation of women during the Franco period' (O'Leary and Ribeiro de Menezes 2008: 115). She explains, *Todas las arengas que monitores y camaradas nos lanzaban en aquellos locales inhospitos, mezcla de hangar y de cine de pueblo, donde cumplí a regañadientes el Servicio Social, cosiendo dobladillos, haciendo gimnasia y jugando al baloncesto, se*

encaminaban, en definitiva, al mismo objetivo: a que aceptásemos con alegría y orgullo [...] nuestra condición de mujeres fuertes, complemento y espejo del varón. p. 85) This description has been structured in such a way as to sarcastically signify what was expected on women during the regime. She is able to look back with humour on the expectations of the society she grew up in. As Brown suggests, ' Luckily, she learned at an early age that the sentiments of the Fascists ruling party were not those of her own family, and that there was a dichotomy between what was thought at home and what was valued outside' (Brown 1987: 158).

Martin Gaité discretely ignored the inhibitions to freedom imposed by the Government's restrictions and with the support of her mother, she attended university, surpassing the limited, narrow parameters of women's lives. However, it is apparent that she was in fact influenced by the social tendencies of the time. Through her references to Hollywood stars such as Garbo, and her vision of the interviewer as the hero of a romantic novel, we discover that her thoughts and behaviour are influenced by romantic literature and Hollywood glamour.

The fantasy of each of these became a reality and something these women were expected to aspire towards as a sort of model of behaviour. Sharing such memories with her reader, providing an insight into the social customs of recent history, collective memory is captured. The narrator explains her difficulty in writing her memoirs because her memories of the war and post-war years are disordered and confused. She describes the post war period as ' un panorama tan ancho y tan revuelto, como una habitación donde cada cosa está en su sitio precisamente al haberse salido de su sitio' (p. 93).

Her desire to write these memoirs arises when she is watching Franco's funeral. As she watches the funeral procession, she summarises what she recalled of Franco's dominance in the society she grew up in, ' Franco pescando truchas, Franco en el Pazo de Mieras, Franco en los sellos, Franco en el NO-DO' (p. 119). The image of Franco was everywhere. As she watches his funeral, the narrator states ' el tiempo se desbloqueaba' (p. 119). ' Franco's death set time in motion again, as well as language, thus allowing the author to explore the recent past and personal history (O'Leary and Ribeiro 2008: 113).

The disorder of time and space, in *El cuarto de atrás*, brings forth a revelation in ethically confronting recent history, establishing a contrast with the imposed order of the regime whose end has inspired this fantastic memoir. As a final point, attention should be drawn to the tension that Martin Gaité creates in her depiction of life in Franco's Spain. This tension lies between her description of the stasis of life under Franco and the life that she managed to live. During this ' frozen' time period, the narrator succeeds in becoming both a novelist and a mother.

Despite the limitations, obligations and deprivation of the dictatorship, she recalls how her childhood and adolescence were happy. The juxtaposition between stasis and dynamism is most brilliantly described in her comparison of the Franco dictatorship with that of the game ' escondite ingles'. Under the threatening eye of the dictatorship, people stood still and froze but behind the back of the regime, when and where they had the opportunity, they strove to run their lives as they pleased. In using a popular childhood game to highlight such tension, her readers are able to return to their past,

focusing not on their pain and anger, but rather on the rhythm of life during this period. To conclude, Martin Gaité's novel, succeeds in offering a new style of writing when confronting recent history. The complex interaction between reality and fantasy, produces a creative and gripping memoir which attempts to capture the collective memory of a generation. In recalling her memories as a child and depicting the role expected of women, Martin Gaité provides us with an insight of what it was like to experience life under Franco.

El cuarto de atrás succeeds as a work that enables us to lift the curtain on painful memories that have been hidden away by so many. The recovery of this memory is a difficult task, but by taking us into the world of the fantastic, these memories can find a path to escape. Bibliography Martin Gaité, Carmen. 2009. El cuarto de atrás, (Madrid: Libros del Tiempo, Ediciones Siruela). Adrian M. Garcia, 2000. Silence in the Novels of Carmen Martin Gaité (New York: Peter Lang). Lipman Brown, Jo. 1987. Secrets from the Back Room: the Fiction of Carmen Martin Gaité' (Valencia: University of Mississippi Press).

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Gaité, quoted in Gazarian Gautier ' Conversacion con Carmen Martin Gaité en Nueva York', 11.