

***Crónica del desamor.* The Involvement of the Reader and the Transmission of Female Experience**

After more than thirty years of fascist rule in Spain, during the 1970s Franco's health was visibly failing. Contrary to the dictator's master plan and to popular expectation, King Juan Carlos set in motion the changes to democracy after the dictator's death in 1975. The initial enthusiasm however soon led to a sense of disorientation and to a general disillusionment, for the fall of the Franco regime did not automatically bring on the long awaited free and happy world. Indeed, the confusion and uncertainty on how to create a new Spain provoked apathy in a population which was not accustomed to the new liberties just gained. Thus, pessimism, apathy, and disillusionment are constant in most Transition novels, which tend to portray the problematic relationship between the individual and his or her circumstances. In the case of Rosa Montero's *Crónica del desamor* (1979), these circumstances include a series of topics that had been little explored until then. The novel focuses on a group of middle-class, working, and mostly educated women in their thirties whose stories, conversations, and everyday life accounts under the Spanish Transition to democracy are depicted. In fact, the novel's treatment of abortion, divorce, and single motherhood makes the novel an important tool for a feminist analysis of Spanish society. Indeed, their political, cultural, familiar, and personal disillusionments form their particular account of life during that period.

***Crónica del desamor* as an Expression of Female Experience**

The hard discipline employed by the Franco regime not only tried to control people's lives, it also attempted to manipulate their historical memory and to fix it to the dictatorship period. The situation continued during the Spanish transition to democracy, which is still perceived by many as a pact of oblivion in which peace and democracy were exchanged for silence. Nonetheless, Franco's attempt to suppress dissidence failed in the literary field, for a number of contestant discourses saw the light with the arrival of the Transition. As democracy became reality in Spain, the breaking with the Francoist political institutions went hand in hand with a breaking with the regime's cultural horizon. Given literature's ability to analyse social and historical constructions, as well as to refocus collective subconscious, novels appear to have a great potential as vehicles to recuperate memory and to convey experience. In this sense, Javier Gómez-Montero, a Professor in Spanish Literature in the University of Kiel (Germany), advocates a literary memory of the Transition that facilitates the release of the collective subconscious, especially of its most repressed aspects. As Joanne Frye, an American educator and author of *Living Stories, Telling Lives* asserts, this would be particularly applicable to women who 'have found in novel reading an important means of gauging their own experience' after having being excluded from many forms of social consensus. In this sense, not only has women's traditionally marginalised position as outsiders placed them as recipients for the stories of others, but their memory in this position also 'includes stories of oppression and repression unknown to men'.

As in earlier Spanish Bildungsroman, which presented the psychological, moral and social shaping of the personality of its protagonists over a process of maturation, the female protagonists of *Crónica del desamor* reconstruct their past lives though their dictatorship and

Transition memories. Although the recompilation of their experiences, memories, and voices, provides the reader with an alternative, and at the same time additional, testimony of the first years of democracy and of the immediate Francoist past, it is essential to remark that this portrayal is limited. The novel focuses on a group of middle-class, working, and mostly educated women in their thirties. Their political, cultural, familiar, and personal disillusionments form their particular account of life during that period. In the narration of this 'novela testimonial', the voice and opinions of the author seem to have been filtered in an attempt to revise personal or transferred female experience.

The Expression of Female Experience, and the Involvement of the Reader

The protagonists of *Crónica del desamor* have already experienced the political disillusionment that went hand in hand with the fall of the Franco regime, and this disillusionment is now spreading to their personal lives. Elena, for instance, lives the end of her love story with Javier with infinite melancholy. But hers is a tearless break-up, and her feelings of tiredness and resignation to the irreversible are reminiscent of those experienced during her retirement from the Spanish Communist Party. As Rose Marie Marcone, Professor of Spanish at the University of Richmond, asserts, 'self-revelation replaces political revolution' in what appears to be the testimony of a group of female friends in their thirties in 1979 Madrid, when the novel was written and published. Although this testimony includes the memories, voices, and stories of different women, the similarity of their personal and emotional circumstances would suggest that they form a multiple, collective protagonist. Above all, what they have in common is their rejection of the Francoist ideal of woman, and their scepticism of the uncertain changes that other more progressive solutions could offer.

The different protagonists that conform the multiple protagonist are focalised through Ana, the witness protagonist who holds the novel together. Ana, a journalist single mother at the age of thirty, is the prototype of her group of friends: the group of all the Anas, of every Ana and of Ana herself, all of them being different yet the same woman. The reader learns about their stories, conversations, and everyday life accounts through an omniscient narrator who not only knows their past and future actions, but who is also aware of their memories, inner thoughts and feelings. Although the narrator is of objective nature, this narrator is responsible for conveying the political ideas of the protagonists, which indeed constitute the highly subjective political message of the novel. In a moment when the voices of women's rights movements were silenced in Spain by what was perceived as a more immediate need – the creation of democracy – the narrator in *Crónica del desamor* rescues those voices and presents them to the reader. The reader becomes involved through identification between the protagonist and the author on one hand, and between the narrator and the author on the other hand. Montero's ideas are therefore articulated through the omniscient narrator, who attributes them to Ana in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the 'double-discourse' of the novel. It is through this 'double-discourse' that the author appropriates the utterances of the narrator as the utterances of another speaker, and is able to use them for her own political aim.

The witness protagonist, Ana, is a young journalist like Montero herself. Working in a male-dominated industry, Ana is under the impression that, were she a man, her efforts at work would have been better valued. Writing is very important to Ana, both professionally and for her

personal development. This coincidence between Ana's and the author's professions does not appear to be casual, for the novel contains autobiographical hints as part of a broader feminist concern. In this sense, the initial sensation of identification between protagonist and author moves on to a sense of identification between Montero and the narrator, in charge of conveying the novel's ideological message. As far as the voicing of the author's thoughts is concerned, the novel is full of jibes aimed at both Franco's Spain and at how little women's lives have changed since its fall. Abortion, for example, was illegal under Franco, and this prohibition was enforced by invasive government action. Given that the law did not pass until 1985, abortion was still illegal practice during the Transition, when *Crónica del desamor* was written. Although it was not uncommon for well-off Spanish women to travel overseas in order to have abortions, other not so wealthy women were forced to put up with clandestine, high-risk terminations in Spain. Occupying one of the first positions in the feminist agenda of that period, abortion is the subject of one of Ana's diatribes:

'Piensa Ana que si los hombres parieran el aborto sería ya legal en todo el mundo desde el principio de los siglos [...] estos guardianes del orden genital ajeno pagarán sin duda un raspado internacional a sus hijas descarriadas, mientras otras mujeres han de someterse a carniceros españoles e ilegales'

'Ana believes that were men able to give birth, abortion would be legal since the beginning of time [...] whilst those watching other people's genital order will not hesitate to provide their unruly daughters with an international suction and curettage procedure, other less fortunate women are however forced to put up with Spanish illegal butchers'

However, the narrator does not appear to be voicing Ana's thoughts in this paragraph, but the thoughts of the implied author, Montero herself. According to Roberto Manteiga, Professor of Spanish in the University of Rhode Island, Montero's wish to create a literary work of art was secondary to her desire to convey her feelings and her distress about a range of feminist matters in the early stage of her career. Her ideas are therefore articulated through the omniscient narrator, who attributes them to Ana in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the 'doublediscourse' of the novel.

In his work of literary theory *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Bakhtin introduces the concept of 'dialogism'. The dialogic work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors. The term 'dialogic', nonetheless, does not just apply to literature, for all language is dialogic, dynamic, relational, and therefore engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world. In this sense, Bakhtin distinguishes monologue, single-voiced discourse, from dialogue, double-voiced discourse. Dialogic discourse, in its relational nature, contains a deliberate reference to someone else's words. In the case of *Crónica del desamor*, the narrator's words, which he or she attributes to Ana, are but a clear reference to Montero's words. Thus, Montero, the author of these double-voiced statements, appropriates the utterances of the narrator as the utterances of another speaker, using them for her own purposes. Hence, as the audience of these double-voiced statements, the reader is offered both the original utterance as Montero's point of view, and the narrator's evaluation of that utterance from another point of view. The author's intentions are finally refracted through the narrative voice which, whilst objective, succeeds to convey the subjectivity of Montero's opinions.

By revealing these not so well known female memories of the Franco period and of the Transition years, the reader is given the opportunity to gauge their own experience. Whereas the variety of voices in *Crónica del desamor* provides the novel with a diverse, dynamic and multiple narration, which comes in clear contrast to the patriarchal, unique viewpoint narration, this is not the only vehicle to express female experience under Franco. The targets for transformation come in the form of the profound feminist criticism of Spain during the Transition, voiced by a narrator who attributes that criticism to the novel's protagonists.

Further reading

1. Joanne S Fry, *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*, 1986
2. Roberto Manteiga, 'The Dilemma of the Modern Woman: A Study of the Female Characters in Rosa Montero's Novels' in *Feminine Concerns in Contemporary Spanish Fiction by Women*, ed. Roberto Manteiga, Carolyn Garlerstein, and Kathleen McNerney, 1988
3. Rosa Montero, *Crónica del desamor*, 1994

