

Transitions: The Evolution of the Spanish Detective Novel in Post-Franco Spain and the Insertion of the Female Sleuth

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Resumen: Tras la muerte del dictador Francisco Franco, hubo un “boom” de la novela policíaca en la península, mediante lo cual, la urgencia para la justicia social es evidente. La libertad recién adquirida facilitó que muchos autores escribieran sin los límites de la censura que antes habían experimentado durante la dictadura. Ahora, los autores españoles de la novela policíaca no tenían que dependerse de los modelos extranjeros, ya que podían implementar convenciones del género específicamente españolas para abordar sus preocupaciones sociales del pasado y del presente. Sin embargo, durante esta época, con la excepción de Lourdes Ortíz, los autores eran mayormente hombres. Mientras muchos de los autores de esa época siguen escribiendo, es durante los ochenta y los noventa hasta hoy día, que el género es más inclusivo de mujeres como autoras de la novela policíaca y también como inspectoras en las novelas mismas: hay una continúa demanda ética para la justicia para l@s que están silenciad@s y marginad@s y eso se ve reflejado en la evolución del género en la península. En mi artículo, examino cómo los cambios sociales en España han influido en los cambios del género negro en la península. El cambio más significativo y el enfoque de mi proyecto es la inclusión de la mujer como inspectora y autora en el género negro y por ende, mi trabajo se centra en la obra global de cuatro autoras: Maria Antònia Oliver, Alicia Giménez Bartlett, Isabel Franc (quien escribe bajo el seudónimo Lola Van Guardia) y Rosa Ribas.

Palabras Clave: Feminismo, Género, Historia, Novela Policíaca, España.

Abstract: Following the death of Franco, there was a boom in detective fiction in the Peninsula through which the urgency for social justice is evident. Newfound freedom to write with few restrictions allowed authors to openly address the social concerns of Spain through specific Spanish conventions of the genre. However, during this time, with the exception of Lourdes Ortiz, both authors and their respective detectives were mainly male. While many of the first-wave writers of the seventies continue writing into the twenty-first century, it is with the second-wave of new detective writers in the eighties and nineties that the Spanish detective genre is more inclusive of female authors; the continual ethical demand for justice for those who are silenced facilitates emerging trends within the genre that are more inclusive of marginal voices and spaces. The detective genre now includes female authors and female sleuths that redefine the previously established conventions of the genre to explore changes in gender roles and norms in a post-feminist, more gender-equal Spain. In my article I examine how the changes within Spanish society since the advent of democracy have led to a demand for different functions within the genre. The primary change I focus on is the insertion of the female (both authors and their respective female detectives) into a male-dominated literary genre. Specifically, I examine the four Spanish female authors who have developed a Spanish female detective series: Maria Antònia Oliver, Alicia Giménez Bartlett, Isabel Franc (who writes under the pseudonym Lola Van Guardia), and Rosa Ribas.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, History, Detective Novel, Spain.

The death of Dictator Francisco Franco on November 20th, 1975, also known as “el veinte-ene,” signifies a pivotal moment in Spain’s history. Franco’s death and this date marked the end of almost forty years of dictatorship and signaled a new beginning in Spain, a period known as the transition to democracy. During this time, many authors, journalists, film makers, and artists grappled with recuperating a traumatic historical past that had been repressed through censorship, reconciling it with the newfound freedom they were now experiencing in post-Franco, democratic Spain. A variety of platforms were used by authors during this time to explore history, trauma, and memory in writing. While the memoir, on a personal and psychological level,

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became a popular genre at this time, additionally, there was a boom in detective fiction in the Peninsula through which the urgency for social justice for those who were silenced is evident. Since the death of Franco, artists and intellectuals have used myriad creative outlets in an attempt to recuperate and work through a traumatic past that had been manipulated and erased by the regime. The boom in crime fiction stands as a cultural outlet, both in the way that it focuses on social and political problems in post-Franco Spain and through its embrace by a large number of authors.

Writers that came into prominence during this time created multi-faceted and quirky Spanish detectives who through a quest to unravel a crime and solve a murder, also show the underbelly of society during and after the Franco dictatorship, often represented now without the constraints of the Franco years. Above all, through the use of gritty language and a focus on urban dysfunction, the broad political corruption of Spain is revealed and explored. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Eduardo Mendoza, Juan Madrid, Jorge Martínez Reverete, and Lourdes Ortiz are some of the best-known writers of this period who make up the first wave of Spanish detective fiction in democratic Spain. These authors openly address the social concerns of Spain through specific Spanish conventions of the genre. That is to say, they no longer needed to rely on foreign models, such as Edgar Allen Poe, Agatha Christie, Hammett, or Chandler like they used to during the Franco years, nor did they have to develop the plot in other countries with foreign sounding names. Now writers were able to openly address the social concerns of Spain through specifically Spanish manifestations of the genre. The political affiliation of this large group of detective novel writers is seemingly what catapults the genre into prominence upon the death of Franco. A prime example of this can be seen in comparing Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's novel *Tatuaje*, written in 1974 before the death of Franco, and *La soledad del manager* written in 1977 after his death. In an interview with literary critic Patricia Hart, Vázquez Montalbán explains, "Cuando tenía que salir un policía hice que el personaje viajara a Amsterdam para que los policías fueran holandeses. Así evité problemas de identificación" (Hart 96). And after the death of Franco in *La soledad del manager*, Vázquez Montalbán states:

[*La soledad del manager*] viene después de la muerte de Franco y se nota mucho porque hay un estallido incluso excesivo de todas aquellas cosas que habían estado prohibidas. Salen policías bastante torvo hay mucha sexualidad, mucha porque era algo que estaba prohibido antes. Te digo como dato que cuando escribí *Yo maté a Kennedy*, me dijeron que lo publicarían a cambio de quitarse de una serie de páginas la palabra "carne" aplicada al cuerpo de una mujer y sustituirla por la palabra "cuerpo"... Así que en *La soledad del manager*, por la nueva libertad, quizá me pasé. (qtd. in Hart 96)

What is noteworthy here is the impact that the newfound freedom had on the content, language, and social backdrop of the novel during the transition to democracy. However, during this time, with the exception of Lourdes Ortiz, both authors and their respective detectives were mainly male. While many of the first-wave writers of the seventies continue writing into the twenty-first century, it is with the second-wave of new detective writers in the eighties and nineties that the Spanish detective genre is more inclusive of female authors; the continual ethical demand for justice for those who are silenced facilitates emerging trends within the genre that are more inclusive of marginal voices and spaces. The detective genre now includes female authors and female sleuths that redefine the previously established conventions of the genre to explore changes in gender roles and norms in a post-feminist, more gender-equal Spain.

This study focuses on how the changes within Spanish society since the advent of democracy have led to a demand for different functions within the genre. One of the main changes I focus on in the present study is the insertion of the female (both authors and their respective female detectives) into a predominately male literary sphere. Some of the questions I analyze are: Does gender matter? Are the female detective traits similar to or different from those of the male detectives? Do the components, characteristics, and meanings that have been attached differ according to gender? I argue that the female detective both reflects the male-dominated genre, and also differs from it.

As previously mentioned, of the first generation of Spanish detective authors of the 1970's, there is one female author, Lourdes Ortiz, who writes *Picadura mortal* in 1979 in which she breaks with the traditions of male detectives in Spain by creating the female detective Bárbara Arenas. However, Bárbara is described by literary critic Patricia Hart as being a walking compendium of negative stereotypes and disappoints as a prospective liberated woman:

Her thoughts and conversations are full of worries about whether or not she is wearing the right clothes, if the other women at the table are more attractive than she, and whether or not her *intuición femenina* is working at any given moment. Although she is active, it is frequently without a plan or thought, and in reality Bárbara Arenas actually embodies few of the strong, positive qualities one expects in a successful male detective, and by contrast is a walking compendium of many negative stereotypes about women. (Hart 173)

In Ortiz's defense, critic Alicia Giralt in her article "La detective Bárbara Arenas, a la búsqueda de modelos" attributes these negative female stereotypes to a lack of space and role models during the 70's. Additionally, critic Jacky Collins explains the following in the introduction to *Mujeres Malas: Women's Detective Fiction From Spain*:

Alicia Giralt focuses on the character Bárbara Arenas in Lourdes Ortiz's *Picadura mortal* (1979), often deemed to be the first woman-authored female detective in Spanish literature, arguing that she embodies the conflict experienced by those women in Spain who struggled to achieve liberation in the late 1970's, yet who lacked an established space or role model upon which such liberation might be based. (Collins 11)

If there is a lack of space and role model for Lourdes Ortiz and female sleuth Bárbara Arenas in the 1970's, the multitude of social changes during the eighties and nineties permits the second generation of female detective writers to explore these social changes freely with alterations to the previously established conventions of the genre.

Previously, the liberated woman's role defined by the conventions during the 70's is seen only in a few forms: for comic relief, as a victim, or as an evolved form of the femme fatale. Critic Renee Craig-Odders discusses this in the introduction of her article "Feminism and Motherhood in the Police Novels of Alicia Gimenez Bartlett" when she writes:

The stereotype of women as inherently good has contributed to the scarcity of female protagonists in crime novels. Consequently, the most

powerful female role in crime fiction traditionally has been reserved for the one bad femme fatale character whose function is to challenge and emasculate men and to lure them into criminal acts and danger. (Craig-Odders 75)

Because of the stark social realism associated with the *género negro* in Spain, the evolution of the Spanish detective novel can be linked in many ways to the changing concerns of contemporary Spanish society. More specifically, the enactment of the Spanish constitution in 1978, the legalization of divorce in 1981, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2005 are some of the changes in contemporary Spanish society that can be seen reflected in the female detective novels of the eighties and nineties. Literary critic Tiffany Trotman highlights how these changes have thus contributed to the redefinition of social institutions such as the family unit in her book *The Changing Spanish Family: Essays on New Views in Literature Cinema and Theater*. As Spain becomes more accepting of new roles within traditional concepts like the Spanish family, the detective genre also becomes more inclusive of the sub-genres and conventions that define it. Trotman points out: Diversity in Spanish families has resulted from a modification of societal norms and consequently legitimacy has arisen around non-traditional relationships. For example, marriages without children or children outside of marriage are now considered acceptable albeit alternative options. Additionally, same-sex partnerships have been legally granted the same civil rights as heterosexual partnerships and according to a survey by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, a majority of the population supported change. (Trotman 2)

The important changes in society are reflected in the topics explored in the Spanish detective fiction of the late eighties and early nineties by female authors Alicia Giménez Bartlett, Maria Antònia Oliver, and Isabel Franc who writes under the pseudonym Lola Van Guardia and Rosa Ribas. For example, in Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Ritos de muerte* (1996), the controversial much-debated first line of the novel explains first and foremost the female protagonist Petra Delicado's separation from not just her first husband but also from her second one. The first lines read, "Algún tiempo después de mi segunda separación me empeñé en encontrar una casita con jardín en la ciudad" (Giménez Bartlett 7). This particular text is wrought with reflections on the transitions that have occurred in a progressively more liberal society, and thus, signals the evolving nature of a more inclusive detective genre.

Many of the new female detective writers during this time use the genre to chronicle the social changes within the urban environment as it pertains to the gender-role transitions and evolving definitions of the Spanish family. Lola Van Guardia, for example, uses the detective genre to employ a lesbian-utopian aesthetic by excluding primary male characters from the text. Critic Barbara Wilson has argued that Lola Van Guardia's "inclusion of a lesbian detective overturns the conventions and has the power to ask questions about the nature of society" (qtd. in Collins 79). The advancement of a more gender-equal society, the ability to divorce, and the legalization of gay marriage has dramatically changed Spanish society's traditional roles. These changes in society play a role in prompting a more inclusive detective genre for female writers.

For example, Alicia Giménez Bartlett's female sleuth, Petra Delicado, is a twice-divorced, lawyer-turned-detective, bad-mouthed female newly planted in her home in Barcelona. She is teamed up with sub inspector Fermín Garzón. As Petra is his superior, the traditional gender roles of power and hierarchy are inverted and we see these new roles developed over the course of the ten installments of the series to date. Furthermore, although Petra is one of the first female detectives of the early nineties, she does not promote a sense of female solidarity as one might suspect, but

rather manifests the weaknesses of many of the female characters. This has raised much debate on whether or not Petra Delicado can be read as a feminist or post-feminist. Maria Antònia Oliver's female detective Lònia Guiu is a Mallorcan feminist sleuth whose crimes center on those of rape or sexual assault. Oliver's three female detective novels deal with sexism in post-Franco Spain during the 80's and 90's and as Nancy Vosburg has pointed out, Lònia must constantly confront the machista culture, and the archaic contorted code of honor that not only limits women's autonomy and agency, but makes rape a cultural norm. Oliver deploys her feminist sleuth to critique a social and legal system slow to respond to the dramatic political changes of the post-Franco period (qtd. in Collins and Gosland 24). Furthermore, with Lola Van Guardia we see the disappearance of primary male characters from the texts, which serves to underscore the current invisibility or even absence of women, particularly lesbians, in previous detective fiction. Finally, in Rosa Riba's female detective series, the emergence of a twenty-first century female detective, Cornelia Weber-Tejedor emigrated to Germany and with a German father and Galician mother, highlights trends in emigration and globalization. These new female writers and sleuths that have emerged in the late eighties and early nineties have helped to re-define the traditional conventions and call attention to the marginal figures of society. There is an emphasis on giving a voice to those who are marginalized within a changing social context. The detective genre in Spain has been typically male; however, what has been largely overlooked are women detectives who share some of the characteristics with their male counterparts but because of gender and tradition have been marginalized and voiceless. The transition to democracy in Spain and the changes to the conventions of the detective genre have created new avenues for female authors to explore with their respective female detectives.

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