

Adolf Piquer & Adéla Koťátková (ed.), *Character and Gender in Contemporary Catalan Literature*, Berlín, Peter Lang Verlag, 2022, 222 p, ISBN: 9783631880616.

The publishing house Peter Lang printed this volume, the fourth in its collection, in 2022, the editors of which being Adolf Piquer Vidal and Adéla Koťátková. This book, *Character and Gender in Contemporary Catalan Literature*, throughout its 222 pages and 12 chapters, contributes to the analysis of Contemporary Catalan Literature from the perspective of gender and pays special attention to literary characters.

The beginning of this book is a chapter on the comparison between two major characters of Mercè Rodoreda and Caterina Albert, who stand out for their imagination and attention to that which is observable. For this reason, Maria Dasca studies the lexicon associated with the semantic field of visual perception in «*Ser tota ulls*. The Visual Imagination of Mila and Natàlia, the Two Major Characters of Caterina Albert / Víctor Català and Mercè Rodoreda». Although the time lapse between these two characters is almost half a century, there is an evident parallelism between them. Moreover, the way in which they express themselves echoes one of the most characteristic contributions to the contemporary novel: the construction of a complex individual perspective. The eyes, as a mirror of the soul, initiate a complicated game of views and visions (dreams, nightmares, etc.) on topics such as pregnancy and the way they look at their own bodies or that of others.

In the second chapter, «Imaginary Women in Mercè Rodoreda's Fiction», Carles Cortés investigates characters rooted in fantasy and symbolism, which are outside the realm of reality, in some of Rodoreda's novels. This chapter explores angels, characters of fantasy and characters who suffer metapsychosis or metamorphosis. Profane or Christian traditions, as well as legends and folk literature, overlap and mix. While describing reality, that which is intangible is also explored, therefore, the line between what really is and what it is not has another meaning in some of Rodoreda's fiction. This is the reason behind Rodoreda's female characters use of their imagination, it

allows them to escape the harsh realities of their lives, in which they are often marginalized and oppressed in spite of their strong sense of self and desire for freedom.

Continuing in chapter three, «Women-in-Process: Isabel Clara Simó, Montserrat Roig and Carme Riera's Female Characters», M. Àngels Francés Díez expands on the description of some female characters of Isabel Clara Simó, Montserrat Roig and Carme Riera. These characters are different *women-in-process*, this terminology, used by the author, draws from the theory of Julia Kristeva (1984) on *subject-in-process* and the theory of Rosi Braidotti, *nomadic subjects*. These women are searching for their place in a society which is neither modern nor advanced; consequently, they experience a fracture with the obnoxious past. Francés argues that these characters are engaged in a process of self-discovery and transformation, and that their stories reflect the changing social and political realities of women in Catalonia.

The way in which the Valencian poet Vicent Andrés Estellés understood femininity and women as an object of desire is the topic of the fourth chapter, researched by Vicent Salvador in «The Desired Woman: Portraits of Women in the Poetry of Vicent Andrés Estellés». This study focuses on his descriptions of three female figures in particular: his wife (Isabel), an attractive prostitute (La Cordovesa del Raval), and a young woman (Jackeley). Referring to these women is the conduit the poet uses to express different types of affection, desire and emotional interest. For his wife, he expresses a carnal, passionate love which has evolved over time into a different type of connection: she is the mother of his children. When referring to the prostitute and the young woman, he expresses physical desire, and a lack of biographical content is appreciated. Furthermore, the figure of the young lady expresses the desire of a fifty-year-old poet for his past youthfulness and freedom.

In the fifth chapter, «Poems, Diaries and Masks: Joan Ferraté», Rafael Mérida studies the theme of sincere and uncensored love through the diaries and poems of Joan Ferraté. The work of this author (1924-2003) was compiled in 1987 under the name of *Catàleg general* and in three diaries that were published in 2018 under the title of *Del desig*. The noteworthiness of this author lies in the fact that the most prevalent theme in his work is homoeroticism, especially towards the figure of a young Daniel J. Szostakiwskyj. As Mérida indicates, it is hard to forget the ever-present repression of Francoism permeating different aspects of everyday life. However, these poems are written with words imbued with love, without false pretences or any kind of censorship. In addition, Ferraté evolves throughout his three diaries, the last one is written by a mature author who expresses himself and articulates his desires unhindered by social conventions.

Lesbian romantic love and motherhood in Eva Baltasar's work are the topics in the following two chapters (five and six). Two of the latest novels of Eva Baltasar are the object of study of Azucena Trincado in «On Sexual Difference and Lesbianism in Eva Baltasar's Novels *Permagel* (2019) and *Boulder* (2020)». Both of them talk about controversial topics and conventions which are still sensitive in current times. These feminine voices use autofiction as a genre which «makes political claims form personal statements possible», as the author explains (p.104). They offer a fresh and insightful perspective on the experiences of lesbian women. Moreover, Baltasar's writing forces her readers to think critically about issues of gender, sexuality and identity.

Meri Torras continues the study of female protagonists of Baltasar's work with «Demystification of (Lesbian) Romantic Love and Estrangement in Motherhood: Eva Baltasar's Lonely Protagonists». Lesbian maternity and assisted reproduction are issues explored in both novels. These novels investigate the dichotomy between the desire to be a mother and the vicissitudes of parenting in a lesbian relationship, offering a realistic and honest portrayal of (lesbian) romantic love and estrangement in motherhood, far from idealization. The characters are designed to minimise empathy towards them, but precisely because of that, the writer can explore the transformative power of literature and focus the readers' attention on these topics.

The focus of study in the eighth chapter are the Phaedra(s) and Antigona(s) in the work of Ramon Rosselló, «Rewriting Female Characters in Contemporary Catalan Theatre: Phaedra and Antigone», in which the versatile quality of myths is showcased. The chapter explores how these female characters from Greek mythology were rewritten by various Catalan dramatists, including Llorenç Villalonga, Salvador Espriu, Josep M. Muñoz i Pujol, Miquel M. Gibert and Jordi Coca. It is clear that these authors use these two powerful mythical figures to take a closer look at femininity, love and political thinking. Rosselló's chapter is a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary Catalan theatre. It provides a thoughtful analysis of these important plays, which offer new insights into the lives of women in the classical world and in the modern world.

In the ninth chapter, Àlex Martín scrutinizes «Teresa Solana or How to X-ray Catalan Society through Crime» and explores the trilogy of one of the most important writers in the contemporary Catalan detective novel genre. Topics as controversial as the Catholic tradition, the recession, Francoism and the Catalan referendum on Independence are discussed in Teresa Solana's work, using fiction and crime investigation as a means to discuss them. Solana's crime fiction is characterized by its realism and its focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people. She often sets her stories in working-class neighbourhoods and focuses on characters who are marginalized or

oppressed. Her criminals are complex characters who are often motivated by social and economic factors. This allows her to explore a variety of social issues, such as poverty, inequality and corruption.

The lives of two victims of a false accusation of adultery are explored in the following chapter, «Two (non-) adulterous Women: Cécile St. Arnaud and Isabel de Galceran». Diana Nastasescu examines in the tenth chapter two of the lesser-known nineteenth-century novels dealing with adultery: *Vilaniu* and *Cécile*. The punishment and death of both women represent the triumph of the community over the individual. Although during the nineteenth century, especially in the second half, there was a steady change of mentality on issues relevant to marriage and the role of women in society, these novels still display a very significant level of moralisation. Women are described as victims of patriarchal double standards, indoctrinating women with bygone values of chastity and purity. All the while, as Nastasescu demonstrates, breaking these codes of conduct is not necessarily a requirement for punishment.

In chapter eleven, «Trans Characters in Valencian Narrative in the 1970s and 1980s», Juan Gil Martínez analyses the role of trans characters in Valencian narratives during these decades, especially in regard to the sociocultural context at the time. Transvestism, concealed by the censorship of institutions, was deleted from any form of public document during the Francoist dictatorship. However, authors such as Amadeu Fabregat, Lluís Fernández, Josep Antón Fernández, Isa Tròlec and Joan Vila i Vila played a crucial role in breaking down the barriers of prejudice. Their works featured trans characters who are complex individuals with their own unique stories and experiences, not mere stereotypes. These authors' efforts helped pave the way for more inclusive and diverse representations of trans identities in Valencian literature.

In the last chapter of the book, «Forgotten Voices: From the Brothel to Literature», Adolf Piquer examines the archetype of the prostitute in contemporary Catalan literature. Piquer begins the chapter by providing a historical overview of prostitution, from a relatively accepted profession in the Middle Ages to a stigmatized and marginalized activity in the contemporary era. Prostitutes have been systematically marginalized and silenced in Catalan literature and their voices have been largely absent from the literary canon. Therefore, this study also raises important questions on the role of literature in shaping our understanding of social groups and marginalized individuals.

The structural line of thought permeating each of the previous chapters is exploring the significance of the recent socio-historical context, the enduring imprint of Francoism, and gender perspective in contemporary Catalan literature. This allows us to examine the work of prominent female authors with the depth and recognition they deserve, bringing them, and other marginalised voices such as those of

prostitutes and transvestites, to light from oblivion in historical canon. While these novels and poems retain elements of traditional patterns and established constructs of interpersonal relationships, they also represent a fresh approach to love and desire (non-heteronormative relationships, romantic love, etc.). Moreover, these narratives challenge the normative model and dismantle the sociocultural construct imposed on our society and, in the process, represent a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, which actively shapes new trends in contemporary Catalan literature, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

TERESA CUESTA ESTEVE
Universitat de València
t.cuestaesteve@edu.gva.es
ORCID 0009-0004-6552-2528