

The Question of 'Women's Writing': A 'Double-Edged' Double Bind?

The 'special' and double-edged position of 'women's literature' – [that] it is at once highly marketed and rendered invisible – makes critics uncomfortable and makes authors wonder whether the category itself may lead women writers into a trap.

— HENSELER (2003a:16)

Henseler's comment draws attention to the problem with the label 'women's writing'. Its existence (or not) is controversial, and the debate as to whether women write differently from men, or whether a label for writing by women ought to exist, has a long history. This chapter introduces the debate in two sections: first a brief overview of recurring themes in a debate that has been conducted largely outside Spain and that has been summarized so effectively by the feminist critic Toril Moi, while the second examines the views of Spanish women writers with regards to the four currents of opinion identified by Elaine Showalter.

The Response to the Debate outside Spain

Any introduction to the debate surrounding the much-debated existence of 'women's writing' and offering an overview of feminist literary theory must begin by mentioning Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), whose publication continues to inspire and challenge feminist thinkers. De Beauvoir draws on different disciplines, such as history, religion, literature, philosophy, and anthropology, to demonstrate how one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman by learning and

following the role moulded by patriarchy over centuries of male domination. Since the publication of de Beauvoir's work, feminist theory has continually evolved, adapted to, and challenged new cultural and academic environments.

In the 1960s, American feminism gained momentum with the civil rights movement. In Britain the feminist movement was equally politically orientated. As a result, Anglo-American feminism is deeply concerned with history, and situates both feminist concerns and literary texts within an ideological, cultural, and political context. Among the earliest, most influential Anglo-American feminist works are Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Ellman analyses the representation of femininity in British and American literature, exposing sexual stereotypes and comparing criticism by men and women authors. By focusing on selected works by male authors, Millet examines the role played by the patriarchy in sexual relations. Greer draws on disciplines such as history, literature, biology, and popular culture to highlight sexual liberation as the way to fight women's oppression and social conditioning.

Social conditioning is also key in Gilbert and Gubar's now canonical study, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979). The authors assert that literature by women has been traditionally marked by its authors' sense of inadequacy, inferiority, and self-doubt – qualities that they link, historically, to the inferior education of women (1979: 59–60). According to these critics, whose focus of interest is a series of nineteenth-century women authors, 'phenomena of *inferiorization* mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart' (1979: 50). In the same vein, Elaine Showalter notes that, in a literary text, what is presented as the human experience and perspective is commonly a masculine one (1971: 856). This produces the vicious circle in which 'an androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretive strategies, which in turn favour the canonization of androcentric texts and the marginalization of gynocentric ones' (cited in Schweickart 1980: 54). Indeed, Showalter is well known

for her pioneering efforts to recuperate literary texts written by women that had been marginalized by the literary canon, establishing a parallel literary tradition that should be fully integrated into our literary heritage. This form of feminist criticism, which she named *gynocritics*, is explained in 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (Showalter 1979). Hence, in its desire to revise a patriarchal literary tradition and introduce a more nuanced understanding of gender theory, feminist literary criticism has therefore claimed the right to a series of spaces traditionally regarded as extra-literary and based on their close relationship to the traditionally domestic or private sphere. If we accept the critique that women writers have historically been subject to a number of gender-prescribed choices, and that their works therefore belong to a distinctive literary tradition, subsequent questions arise. Does this mean that they will write differently from men? If so, where is this difference located, and will women necessarily employ a specifically female language to portray their experience?

While the Anglo-American theorists discussed the role played by gender in the context of a patriarchal society, French feminists focused on discourse as a vehicle for coding and keeping the dominant patriarchal order. Moving away from the psychoanalytic premises of Freud and Lacan and the deconstructive methods of Derrida, French feminism argues that all Western languages are eminently male-engendered and male-dominated, focusing on the constructed nature of subjectivity and representation. Among the main foundational works of French feminism are Lucy Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), which looks at psychoanalysis from a feminine perspective and challenges psychoanalytical representations of women, Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) claims that women should revel in everything that makes them different from men; in it she introduced the seminal term *écriture féminine*, which narrates women's experiences and desires and encourages experimentation in language. For Annette Kolodny, an individual consideration of each author is the only way to observe whether particular stylistic patterns recur in female fiction. Her research leads her to conclude that reflexive perception and inversion are the most persistent traits (cited in Moi 1997: 70–1). Reflexive perception occurs when a character encounters unexpected or incomprehensible situations. Inversion,

on the other hand, happens when the stereotypical images of women in literature are subverted with the purpose of humour, revelation of their hidden reality, or connotation of their opposites (1997: 70–1). Conversely, Myra Jehlen maintains that the difference between men's and women's writing cannot be determined through the study of women's texts alone, but requires comparisons with writing by men (cited in Moi 1997: 70–1). Julia Kristeva, on the other hand, regards language as the product of a heterogeneous, ever-changing process, reminding us that no study of sex difference in literature can ever be conclusive. She chooses, rather, and as Moi explains, to champion the study of explicit linguistic strategies in precise situations in male- and female-authored texts (1997: 152–5). With regard to writing by women, Kristeva finds it impossible to affirm whether the peculiarities of women's literature are due to a 'truly feminine specificity, socio-cultural marginality or more simply to a certain structure which the present market favours and selects among the totality of feminine potentiality' (Moi 1997: 163).

Kristeva does, however, concede that various recurrent stylistic and thematic patterns can be distinguished in 'women's writing', though it is impossible to ascribe these characteristics to something we might define as 'femaleness' or 'femininity'. It would seem safer to ascribe them to a socio-cultural marginality, or more simply, to the selection carried out by the literary market from among the totality of feminine potential. According to Kristeva, the same stylistic and thematic patterns can be found in all language, and have been marginalized by what Lacan refers to as the 'Law of the Father'. For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the structure of language and its rules are inherently paternal. Submission to the rules and laws of language itself, namely the Law of the Father, is required in order to become a speaking subject and to enter the Symbolic. Thus, through the acceptance of a number of restrictions that control both the subject's desire and the rules of communication, the child enters a community of others and is able to interact with them. It is perhaps for this reason that Kolodny's notion of 'inversion' in 'women's writing', that is, the subversion of stereotypes, appears as one of the two most frequent traits in writing by women. Kristeva calls language that refuses to conform to the Law of the Father 'carnavalesque', co-opting a term used by the Russian critic

Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos. For Kristeva, 'carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest' (1980: 65).

For contextualizing purposes I have merely outlined a simple differentiation between the Anglo-American and French feminists, but it ought to be pointed out that, since the 1980s, debates surrounding the superiority of each mode have abated as the dividing lines between them have become blurred. Indeed, feminist writers have used and continue to use different theoretical approaches in order to examine the ways in which gender operates within literary texts. According to feminist literary historian Janet Todd's *Feminist Literary History* (1988), the literary representation of the domestic and private is as valuable as the literary representation of the public and civic. Nonetheless, Toril Moi (1997) warns against interpreting the mere fact of narrating women's experience as a feminist act, a statement strongly supported by Rosalind Coward. For Coward,

[f]eminism can never be the product of the identity of women's experiences and interests – there is no such unity. Feminism must always be the alignment of women in a political movement with particular political aims and objectives. It is a grouping unified by its *political interests*, not its common experiences. (1986: 238)

One of the first questions that tend to arise when considering this debate is whether women's writing is feminist writing. In her now classic essay, 'Feminist, female, feminine' (1997), Moi explains that a clear grasp of the differences between these three terms (feminist, female, feminine) is crucial to understanding the political and theoretical implications of contemporary feminist criticism. For Moi, the word 'feminist' implies a political position in line with the objectives of the new women's movement as it emerged in the 1960s, so that 'feminist criticism', whilst embracing a multitude of different political views, is understood not merely as a concern for gender in literature, but as 'a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism' (1997: 104). The term 'female', she points out, refers simply to biology, and the third of her terms, 'feminine', is defined as a set of characteristics that are culturally specific. It is a

long-established practice among feminists to use this last term to refer to sexual and behavioural patterns that are imposed on women, as opposed to the term 'female', which is reserved for biological characteristics.

Michèle Barrett (1982) takes a slightly different approach from Moi, suggesting that feminism as a political project should not be divorced from women's experience, while Rita Felski offers a useful path between the two positions. Felski's term 'feminist confession' refers to women's writing that 'exemplifies the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience' (1989: 165). She asserts that the popularity of women's fiction on account of its description and portrayal of women's experience is one of the strengths of feminism. Since the late 1970s this concept of women's experience has vastly expanded to include female voices other than white, middle-class, heterosexual voices, and in fact feminist criticism has also considered intersectionality, looking at how factors including race, sexuality, religion, physical ability, politics, and class are also involved. Anna Carastathis defines intersectionality as 'the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege' (2014). With regards to the feminist movement, a key moment was the Combahee River Collective's *A Black Feminist Statement* manifesto, which in 1979 claimed that their unique black feminist movement was necessary, given the racism they had experienced in the context of mainstream feminism, while simultaneously suffering sexism in the context of antiracist struggles. That same year, Audre Lorde's paper 'The Master's Tools will never Dismantle the Master's House' denounced mainstream feminism for its futile and counterproductive stance in ignoring the fact that racism, homophobia, and poverty are intersecting forms of oppression, and demanded that the voices of women of all races, classes, and sexuality should be heard. Since then, leading feminists have published works opening groundbreaking debates and pleading for a more critical treatment of representations of heterosexuality as the norm; see, for example, Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980). A defence

emerged of women's right to enjoy their sexualities in ways promoted by the sex industry and seen by many as encouraging violence against women; Gayle Rubin's 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (1984) demanded that Western women recognize their own privilege and how they have silenced Third World feminists by speaking for them (see also Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, 1984). Others championed the concept of hybridity as a means of reflecting various cultural differences and of fighting racist and sexist paradigms (Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1987). Likewise, Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (1991) uses cyborgs as a metaphor for highlighting the problematic use of traditional Western traditions and taxonomies, and calls for a revision of gender constructs as categories for identity. Many would argue as well that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) changed the trajectory for future feminist scholarship when its author questioned the category 'woman' as essential and interpreted gender as a performative act, thus paving the way for queer theory and the study of dissident sexualities.

In sum, as Gill Plain and Susan Sellers affirm in their introduction to *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (2007: 1), 'The impact of feminism on literary criticism over the past thirty-five years has been profound and wide-ranging'. Besides continuing to affect a host of related disciplines such as philosophy, history, media studies, cultural studies, theology, law, and economics, current debates include how – and whether – women's bodies should be digitally altered, sexual assault and how it should be discussed, regretting motherhood, and the morality or immorality of surrogacy, among many other controversial topics. Moreover, the revolutionary mission undertaken by feminist scholars (to which this series contributes) has since the 1970s been re-shaping the literary canon and thus 'radically influencing the parallel processes of publishing, reviewing and literary reception' (Plain and Sellers 2007: 1). This process is still very much ongoing, and indeed plenty of works by women writers have been successfully rediscovered and given the critical and public attention they deserved.

The Response to the Debate inside Spain: ‘On a knife’s edge’

We women writers are reluctant to be held in publishing ghettos, thus exhibiting a slightly schizophrenic position that flatly rejects the label of ‘women’s literature’ and at the same time, [taking advantage of] promotional and anthologies packages of that very same ‘women’s literature’; [...] ‘we keep a stiff upper lip’ as much as we can, *on a knife’s edge*, with respect to universities, public forums and the media. – (Marta Sanz, cited in Henseler 2003b: 61, emphasis added)

Henseler’s comment about the ‘double-edged’ position in which women writers find themselves outlines one of the central paradoxes of women’s writing: that to acknowledge its existence (as writing by women) is to risk its ghettoization. It is to position oneself, as Sanz so evocatively says above, ‘en el filo de la navaja’. This illustrates the point that to discuss women’s literature as separate from men’s literature is controversial, and as this is something I have set out to do in this book, this is an issue I address from the outset.

Just like everywhere else, in Spain the question of the existence (or not) of ‘women’s literature’ has occupied not only women authors, but male authors, critics, readers, reviewers, and academics alike. The situation for the female writer is clearly a complex one. As discussed in Chapter 2, the publishing industry is keen, if only for marketing purposes, to promote the notion of ‘women’s literature’ in a way that is very different from the marketing of the male writer. The manner in which women authors respond to this – or not – may well determine their commercial success and their literary prestige, so the *literatura femenina* label is clearly a double-edged sword.

While most female writers will be asked to address the question of ‘women’s writing’ sooner or later, allusions to the question of ‘men’s writing’ in the case of the male author, his readers, or his characters remain virtually unknown. As Almudena Grandes explains in her prologue to *Modelos de mujer* [Models of Women], ‘Women writers are constantly forced to comment on the gender of the characters in their books, whilst male writers are enviably privileged and exempt from this’ (1996: 16). To test Grandes’ theory, I have examined interviews with Spanish writers in the Spanish

literary magazine, *Qué Leer* [What to Read], from February 2009 to July 2012, and found that in *none* of the sixty-two interviews with Spanish male writers was a single reference made to male identity, be that with reference to their fictional characters, the writer, or the reader. However, in the twenty-three interviews conducted with Spanish women writers over the same period, it was commonplace to find questions such as 'Could we say that you are reclaiming "normal women"?' (Calandri 2009), 'Where do you find the time for your nine children, your university job and your writing?' (Piña 2010b), not to mention biased declarations based on the writer's sex and gender such as: 'Many of the women in these tales are you at some point in your life' (Piña 2010c). Ten, that is, almost half of the twenty-three women interviewed were directly questioned about the relationship between their female condition and their own profession as a writer.¹

The question of gender difference in writing is raised repeatedly in interviews with Spanish women writers,² and the emergence of the so-called boom of women writers during the period of the Transition (the literary generation to which Montero belongs), intensified the debate. Henseler observes that the very different approaches to the writing of the generation of women authors born in the 1960s and 1970s³ 'suggest that a male-female distinction is inappropriate and outdated' (2003a: 14). Henseler makes an important point. The response of many of these women to the question of 'women's writing' certainly suggests that some feel the question is outdated and inappropriate. However, while female authors, like Matute, who belong to earlier generations tend to reject, and may always have rejected, the notion of women's literature, the trend among more contemporary women writers, like Extebarria, is to celebrate the notion of gender difference.

1 These were Clara Usón, Elvira Navarro, Ángeles Caso, Lucía Etxebarria, Julia Navarro, Carmen Gurruchaga, Soledad Puértolas, Reyes Calderón, Almudena Grandes, and Maruja Torres.

2 See, for example: García (2002); López-Cabrales (2000: 151–66); Velázquez Jordán (2002); Salvador (n.d.); Prado (n.d.).

3 This is the generation that includes Lola Beccaria, Lucía Etxebarria, Clara Obligado, Espido Freire, and Paula Izquierdo, as well as more recent work by widely respected women authors from earlier generations.

The ‘women’s writing’ label is indeed a suggestive one, and in her landmark essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979), Elaine Showalter distinguishes between women’s role as readers – consuming male-produced literature – and women’s role as writers, which she terms gynocritics. Within gynocritics, Showalter identifies four currents of opinion dealing with the question of whether women’s writing differs from men’s writing and, if this is the case, where that difference may be located. Although Showalter’s study admittedly focuses on English-speaking female authors, a brief overview of these currents will allow us to identify the main ways in which contemporary Spanish writers respond to the label.

The first, deprecatory current argues that writing by women is inferior to writing by men. Far from being outdated, our field study of critical reviews and interviews in Chapters 2 and 4 will prove that this bias is still very firmly in place, and that the advent of the globalized, internet era has perhaps surprisingly fostered this kind of gender bias. In 2010, Almudena Grandes summed up the problem succinctly: ‘I do not like the term “female literature”, although I would not have any problem using it if the term “masculine literature” also existed’ (for more on this, see Freixas 2008). As the term ‘women’s literature’ is not used alongside an equivalent term ‘men’s literature’ to distinguish between literary works written by either sex, the term may all too easily become, consciously or unconsciously, a means to distinguish ‘women’s literature’ from ‘literature’, in general (Freixas 2008). Espido Freire is also cautious about the risks involved in the use of the term *literatura femenina* by the critical establishment:

One of the most common ways of discrimination is that imposed by the dictatorship of the so-called *female literature* [...] whenever it is mentioned that a man or woman author writes *female literature*, they are being automatically despised. (Alapont 2010)

Likewise, in 2001, Freixas offered a sardonic interpretation of the subtext to the many and various answers that female writers provide to the frequently asked question where they stand on the question of ‘women’s writing’:

I know that what you’re really asking me, you idiot, is if I write literature for women instead of good literature; and what I’m answering, listen up, is that there is indeed

good and bad literature, but that has nothing to do with it being for men or women, get this in your heads, you twits, for twits is what you are. (Freixas 2001)

And Elena Santiago even suggests that most contemporary critics and editors remain under the influence of a male-oriented tradition:

The reason for their [the critics'] behaviour, with rare exceptions, lies in that centuries-old mentality of theirs, which they hold very dear [...]. Most editors are men [...]. For long years, for a long life they remained inflexible and more willing to help male writers [...]. There are editors and critics who are still eager to always be favourable to men. (2003: 42)

Grandes, Freixas, Santiago, and Freire make valid points, and it is also noteworthy that these denunciations of this male-oriented tradition are made by different writers who, respectively, span the time frame of this study (Elena Santiago was born in 1941, Laura Freixas in 1958, Almudena Grandes in 1960, and Espido Freire in 1974), indicating that the debate is still ongoing. However, it is also undeniable that the label has allowed for the promotion of the work of numerous, valuable women writers and of themes that had been traditionally little explored. The paradox, nonetheless, remains. An example of this is provided by Dulce Chacón in her interview with Alapont (2000). Chacón famously won the *Libro del Año* prize for *La voz dormida* [The Sleeping Voice] in 2003, a novel based on interviews she conducted with women imprisoned during the post-Civil War period. Her work has rescued a very important part of women's silenced history and paid particular attention to the status of women in Spain in the context of the Civil War and dictatorship, and yet she is quite clear in her interview with Alapont that the label 'women's writing' denigrates female authors:

There is not a female literature; although there is a literature written by women and a literature written by men, written by homosexuals, written by brunettes, by blondes, by red heads [...]. However, it is only literature written by women that is labelled, 'female'. I think that is simply a matter of degrading women writers. Literature does not need any adjectives, for it is universal.

Chacón seems unaware of the fact that the branding of literature does, in fact, extend to other widely studied categories, such as Black literature, Gay

literature, Jewish literature, and so on, so her aversion to the term may be symptomatic of the fact that issues involving ethnic and other minorities – and their literatures – have dawned only fairly recently on Spanish consciousness, for instance in the works of Herrero Granado (1997: 197–212), Segarra (1998), and Mérida (2007). What the ‘women’s writing’ label has in common with the above-mentioned categories is that the author’s identity is central to the labelling process. It is easy to agree with Chacón, that, along with ‘women’s writing’, these literatures should not be studied as separate literatures to be contrasted with a white, male form of ‘men’s literature’. It is also easy to sympathize with her instinctive sense that adding the adjective ‘women’ denotes inferiority. This assumption that the label denotes inferiority is unfortunately borne out by the negative references to the sex of the author in the critics’ interviews with women writers and the reviews of ‘women’s writing’ highlighted in the first section of this chapter. Such attitudes to women who write are linked to deeply rooted gender prejudices that will take a long time to overcome, and that precede the debates, both academic and public, on ‘women’s writing’. However, the removal of the label alone is unlikely to remove such tenacious prejudice and if there has been such an enormous growth in gender-marked publicity, it is perhaps even more vital to continue to analyse the role of gender in the production and reception of contemporary literature.

The second trend identified by Showalter, championed in Spain by Spanish women writers such as Chacón, Grandes, Matute, and Montero, argues that it is impossible to distinguish writing by women from writing by men and that any intrinsic differences in style and/or subject matter will be individual, and cannot be ascribed to gender difference. Indeed, we find that the tendency is for more veteran writers to privilege the need to dismantle the myth of a literature marked by gender. For example, Carmen Posadas (born in 1953) maintained, in 2010, that although there may be a male and a female viewpoint, ‘at the end of the day there’s only good literature and bad literature’ (*Diario de Navarra*, n.d., n.pag.). Similar statements have been made by other prominent women authors of her generation and older ones, such as Josefina Aldecoa (*El Mundo*, 2004a), Paloma Pedrero Díaz-Caneja (2011: 76), and Ana María Matute (*Ayuso Pérez* 2007). Unlike Montero and Etxebarria, who have dedicated non-fictional works to the

discussion of the existence of 'women's writing', Matute is the only writer that I examine at length here who has not dealt in depth with the question of 'women's writing'. When asked about her opinion on the existence of a difference between a male and a female perspective in literature, Matute's reply is somewhat ambivalent:

Maybe women have a different outlook, but I don't have a very clear opinion on the matter, because literature is one, I don't care if it's written by a man or a woman. There are good books and bad books, period. (Cited in Potok-Nycz 2003: 156)

In Spain, this individualist approach appears to suit – albeit unconsciously – its supporters' desire to reject the separation of male and female activities inculcated in women (and men), during the dictatorship by the *Sección Femenina de la Falange Española* [Women's Section of the Spanish Falange]. The main problem with this approach is that it gives rise to inherent contradictions. Indeed, affirmations made about 'good' and 'bad' literature, such as the one Matute makes above in order to avoid having to comment on sexual difference in writing style, are rarely accompanied by an enumeration of the historical, cultural, or literary factors that combine to produce literary texts. It is now more widely recognized that the process by which a literary canon is created is a selective one, and one which is clearly marked by the cultural criteria, political attitudes, and interests of its creators. Whereas formerly these interests responded primarily to aesthetic, religious, and political criteria, these criteria now increasingly come second to the demands of sales and marketing. Rebecca O'Rourke's discussion of the widespread popularity, in the late 1970s and 1980s, of English-language novels giving central focus to women's experiences notes that '[t]he willingness of mainstream publishers to print and reprint the work of women must be in part their response to the creation, through the women's movement, of a feminist audience whose choice of reading is women centred' (1979: 3). Paula Izquierdo acknowledges a similar tendency to distinguish between male literature and female literature in the Spanish arena:

It could be addressing the market requirements, that is, the need to label, classify, pigeon-hole any 'products' or 'goods'. However, I am afraid that there are other less obvious yet well-documented aspects showing an undercurrent of thought, a cultural

heritage entrenched in the subconscious of some critics and ‘cultural agents’ who tend to dismiss, degrade and systematically undervalue a work for the simple reason it has been signed by a woman. (Cited in Henseler 2003: 122)

The process by which writing by women is integrated, or not, within the literary canon is crucial to the reception of women writers, with women writers themselves frequently denouncing the absence or misrepresentation of their work in mixed anthologies, prizes, or congresses (see Nichols 1987: 80; Montero 2003: 173). If we take just two recent examples, none of the works examined in *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea* [Immigration in Spanish Contemporary Literature] (Andrés-Suárez et al.: 2002), is written by a female author, yet Lucía Etxebarria’s *Cosmofobia* [Cosmophobia], Rosa Montero’s *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* [Instructions to Save the World], and Ángeles Caso’s *Contra el viento* [Against the Wind] – which won the LVIII Premio Planeta in 2009 – are just three examples of well-received novels written by women that deal with the topic of immigration in Spain. Similarly, no female authors are examined in *La literatura española en el exilio: un estudio comparativo* [Spanish Literature in Exile: A Comparative Study] (Ugarte 1999), although nothing in the title suggests that the book’s comparative focus will be limited to male authors.

This tendency to exclude female authors from anthologies and critical studies has, since the mid-1980s, increasingly been countered with women-only collections and events that bring women writers into the public domain. Nonetheless, this could be perceived as a patronizing form of ghettoization that reinforces the segregation that such events and publications attempt to redress, as summed up by Henseler in the epigraph to this chapter.

Prior to the twentieth century, the lack of female artists and intellectuals could have been attributed to lack of opportunity, finance, and/or education. Today, however, Spain’s female university students outnumber male undergraduates, and several generations of women writers have been born during the democratic period. Until recently, women writers were an almost exotic addition to a male-dominated world; nowadays, however, competition in the literary market is fierce and women writers are seen

as new and, for some, commercially overrated competitors. The situation is very different, however, if we look at the question of literary prestige, where 'women's writing' remains underrated. In this sense, Esther Tusquets denounces the segregation of women's writings that the critical establishment practises through what she refers to as 'the women's panel' that is usually presented as distinct from more serious, 'universal' literature (cited in Nichols 1987: 80). This segregation appears to have been made even worse by the increasing commercialization of bookselling, a conundrum that, as I argue in Chapter 2, makes it especially difficult for women writers to balance their public image and their work. This explains why many women who wish to be regarded as serious writers would rather avoid, or completely reject, the label.

The third approach signalled by Showalter is the one which avows a difference between male and female writing, and attributes this difference to individual experience; she notes that, as men and women live different lives, it is only natural that their writing should also be different. In Spain, Etxebarria is perhaps the most vociferous supporter of this trend, which regards the role of women writers as being responsible for raising themes and issues related to women's vital experiences, such as the mother–daughter bond, the experience of childbirth, menstruation, female sexuality, and so on. In this vein, Freixas asserts that she believes that there is

[a] female or women's literature with its own characteristics [...] Its most specific [contribution] focuses on expanding the range of female characters and presenting them as valuable characters both *per se* and in their relationships with other women, and not only with men. (Bengoa 2000)

Whereas the second approach does not regard these themes as the mark of 'women's writing', the third approach argues that, not only are these issues specifically associated with 'women's writing', but that their inclusion in a universal history of literature represents a re-appropriation of domesticity and reclaiming of female experience that automatically makes such writing 'feminist' rather than 'feminine', feminine being a cultural term that shifts across generations, cultures, and religious belief systems. Feminist, on the other hand, has specific political connotations with reference to women's rights.

Thus, Chapter 4 explores that while Matute and Montero establish a separation between politics and literature, Etxebarria regards feminism as something that extends naturally into her fiction. If it can be assumed that we bring our own individual and also a sex- and gender-inflected context to any act of interpretation, what is it that defines ‘women’s writing’, and is it necessarily feminist? According to Lola Luna, a feminist reader should be concerned with ‘the political sense of the term’ and it is not enough to practise ‘a differential reading based on her experience as a woman’ (cited in Navas Ocaña 2009: 69). For Luna, a feminist reading would imply ‘the resistance to the canonical and institutional – patriarchal – pattern of reading interpretation’ (2009: 59). Conversely, the poet Juana Castro warns of the danger implicit in reducing the study of women’s literature to feminist politics and in perpetuating an unnecessary and counterproductive division between women critics and women writers:

There is an issue that worries me: it seems that feminists do their own thing and so do women writers [...] and furthermore, the former despise the latter [...]. Feminists do not care about cultural and artistic developments; they only care about the legal system, about work. It seems that these two worlds are impossible to merge. (Cited in Ugalde 1991: 59)

Of course, not all feminist critics focus exclusively on work and the legal system. Although the source of difference as based in sex and/or gender has never been unanimously established, what is widely recognized by critics such as Hélène Cixous (1997: 101) – who proposes difference, multiplicity, and heterogeneity as the means to combat the binary patriarchal system – and Annette Kolodny (cited in Moi 1997: 70–1), as well as by Spanish authors such as Etxebarria (2000a and b) and Freixas (2000), is that women’s writing brings new topics, new sensitivities, and new character models to literature. Etxebarria overtly champions women’s literature, stating, in her essay ‘Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura femenina’ [With our Own Voice. In Favour of Women’s Literature]:

Women’s literature generally amalgamates the same viewpoint expressed by different voices emanating from our own women’s nature. We have our own style and space of creation, because creation is inherent to the experiences lived by male or female writers. (2000b: 107–8)

Three points raised in this comment ('different voices', 'own women's nature', 'our own style') summarize the main arguments used to justify the separation of 'women's writing' from 'writing'. Etxebarria argues that, just as men and women live and experience life differently, their way of writing will differ, and it is these different styles and voices that are necessary to provide a more complete picture and that should be celebrated for their different literary representation of the world we live in. More problematic, perhaps, is the term 'own nature', which would not only apply to the way in which readers relate to novels, but also to the way every writer's work is determined and influenced by his or her sex. The question as to whether this gender influence is biological or socially constructed is a central part of the debate.

Finally, a fourth approach to 'women's writing', noted by Showalter and generally associated with so-called 'French' feminist literary theory, argues that the difference between male and women writing lies not only in its themes, but also in its structural and formal aspects. Its supporters assert that therefore, not only women, but also men can write *écriture féminine*. Although my research did not find any Spanish writers openly defending, or at least specifically referring to, the concept of *écriture féminine*, I found that it was occasionally hinted at – interestingly, by both supporters and non-supporters of the 'women's writing' label, as will be explored in Chapter 4.

Conflicting Trends

Where the potentially gendered position of male critics, reviewers, and members of academia is seldom questioned, there remains a trend even among well-known, educated, and experienced professionals such as Montero and Grandes, to distrust literary studies carried out by women – feminist or otherwise. Such distrust becomes more pronounced when such studies focus on a range of topics – the figure of the mother or the relationship between mother and daughter, for example – that tend to be regarded

as of interest only to women. Ironically, and this is also a consequence of the assumption that any male quality is universal, the perspective of a male reviewer or academic is still widely assumed to be neutral, and not gender-inflected. Of course, many literary analyses by heterosexual male academics will highlight the figure of the father, or a rival relationship between brothers, but such a focus is rarely interpreted to be of interest only to men, or as taking a position that is prejudiced or gender-biased. Indeed, one of the reasons for focusing only on women in this book is provided by an anecdotal recollection from Etxebarria. In 'Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura de mujeres', Etxebarria explains that the absence of female literary role-models she encountered as a teenager almost dissuaded her from pursuing her desire to become a writer. She also recalls tearing up a first draft after it had been defined as 'too feminine' by a successful male writer (2000b: 105–22). When studying the public reception of Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria, my own work will, therefore, consider that status of 'women's writing' to be a basic and necessary aspect of their construction of female characters and of their own public personae. Chapter 2 will consider that question with regard to the marketing and publishing of women writers in Spain.