

Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria on Women's Writing

Chapter 3 examined the effect on Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria of the increasing commercialization of the literary market, and the gender bias evident in the commodification of the female writer. This chapter analyses their response to the question of the existence (or not) of 'women's writing'. Each is representative of a different literary generation, and as the definition of femininity changes according to the role of women in different historical contexts, it is natural that they respond in different ways to the question of the existence of women's literature.

The question of 'women's writing' was not, for example, an issue of public debate at the beginning of Matute's career, and her ambivalence with regard to its existence may reflect the suppression of debates on the construction of femininity during the Franco dictatorship. For instance, the first translation into Spanish of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy and the starting point of second-wave feminism, happened in 1954 in Argentina. Spain, on the other hand, would have to wait until 1972, when Aguilar publishing house launched a one-volume translation of de Beauvoir's work. This delay resulted in what some critics have interpreted as a lack of 'literary sisterhood' in Matute's fiction (Fuentes in Matute 2011: xviii). Matute's views on the 'women's writing' label will be examined by looking at her participation in numerous events debating and celebrating women's literature, and at her demonstrably high regard for the expression of what she sees as particularly 'female' issues in fiction.

Rosa Montero belongs to the immediate post-dictatorship generation that was directly influenced by feminist theory. Coming to public attention in the late 1970s, she is perhaps the best-known exemplar of the boom in

female writers that appeared in the 1980s. This period marks the beginning of debates as to when gender can be ascribed to literature in Spanish journals and in interviews with Spanish women writers. Her contribution to this debate will be explored by examining interviews with her, as well as the views on the topic she expresses in *La loca de la casa* [The Madwoman in the House] (2003) and, more recently, in *El amor de mi vida* [The Love of My Life] (2011).

Lucía Etxebarria is a self-described feminist, who champions the notion of ‘women’s writing’. Feminism is one of the central themes in her non-fiction, and she admits that one aim of her fiction is to promote political and feminist consciousness. Her views on this topic will be considered through interviews with her, academic analyses of her novels, and *La letra futura* [The Future Letter] (2000a), in which she addresses the question of the ‘women’s writing’ label directly.

Matute’s Views on ‘Women’s Literature’

When Matute’s views on the topic of ‘women’s writing’ have been sought in interviews, her responses are generally brief and forthright:

Cavallé: Does female literature exist?

Matute: No, because literature is not male or female. There is only one literature. (Cavallé 2007)

Unlike Montero and Etxebarria, she has never considered it necessary to write at length about literature, nor about the question of ‘women’s writing’. In fact, she describes the question of ‘literature’ as somewhat distanced from her own concerns:

To me the word ‘literature’ came quite late and it was always also embellished by something I was not doing. Then it turned out I was actually doing ‘literature’. But I wouldn’t know it. I never asked myself this question. What is called literature has no exact definition to me. (Doyle 1985: 238)

Little attention has been paid, therefore, in academic studies of her work, to her thoughts regarding this label. As a celebrated (female) member of the Spanish contemporary art world, and an internationally renowned novelist with a high profile at literary conferences and events, it is interesting that Matute has avoided in-depth questioning on this subject. In interviews with her, the question does arise, but in general her interviewers give it little weight and tend to raise it only as if to comply with some kind of mandatory 'box-ticking' – a question to be posed and swiftly dismissed. Nonetheless, a closer look at her responses suggests that Matute's views on the subject waver; despite the fact that her oft-repeated statement, 'Literature exists, good and bad' (Ayuso Pérez 2007), leaves considerations of gender in the reception of literature to one side, her views on this question continue to affect the way she is perceived in the contemporary Spanish cultural world.

The question of the 'escritoras de agravios' [chroniclers of grievances]

In spite of her rejection of 'women's writing', Ana María Matute has been invited to – and has attended – numerous events debating and/or celebrating literature written by women. In 1994, a symposium on 'women's literature' was held by the Fundación Luis Goytisolo in El Puerto (Cádiz). The debate began with a forthright denunciation by the writer Cristina Peri Rossi: 'When literature is not meaningful any more, because it bears no power, that's when men leave it to us women' (Rodríguez 1994a), and Ana María Matute's response encapsulates her own ambivalent views on the subject quite clearly.

She was quick to distance herself from Peri Rossi, stating categorically: 'One doesn't need to be so radical [...] It is not true that literature is currently underestimated. People read more now than they did in my time', adding, perhaps in an attempt to further distance herself from the issue: 'I only believe in good books or bad books.' However, she did take advantage of this occasion to concede, in a way that clearly reveals her own gender bias, that women possess a wealth of emotion and experiences that may be best narrated by a female writer: 'Like maternity and a certain different sensitivity, though you can't be very strict on that. Even so, tenderness is still a rare feeling in men.'

These statements illustrate the fact that Matute's views on this subject are balanced between the rejection of the 'women's writing' label, and recognition of certain female themes (even feminine themes, if her reference to a 'male' innate lack of tenderness is to be believed). She compliments, for example, her fellow writer Josefina Aldecoa as 'a female writer with an extraordinary sensitivity in capturing the most important moments in a woman's life' (Astorga 2000: 56). The fact that Matute belongs to an older generation of writers, and that her public profile was raised by her invitation to join Spain's most revered (and male-dominated) literary and linguistic institution, the Real Academia, are key factors influencing her position on this subject. Matute has acknowledged that the question of a female literature was not considered at the beginning of her career and that, as a woman writer, she was in a very small minority: 'When I started out, there were only a few female writers, and no distinctions were made between female and male literature' (Ávila 1994: 67). Moreover, this absence of any debate on gender still held for the literary generation that followed. Esther Tusquets, born eleven years after Matute in 1936, a writer who published her first novel, *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* [The Same Sea as Every Summer], in 1978, thirty years after the publication of Matute's *Los Abel*, corroborates Matute's statement. In the *II Simposio Internacional 'Mujer y creación literaria'* [Second International Symposium 'Women and Literary Creation'], Tusquets explains that at the beginning of her writing career, for women of her and Matute's generations, the question of gender difference in literature was not an issue for public debate and their ambivalence is understandable (Ávila 1994: 67). The issue only begins to arise in studies of Matute's work, and in interviews with her, from the 1990s onwards, so her situation is clearly radically different from that of younger women writers, like Etxebarria, who have been familiar with the question of sex and gender from the beginning of their literary career.

Rather than distinguishing between male literature and female literature, Matute prefers to acknowledge the differences between men and women who write. For Matute, writers are born, not made: 'You are a writer, full stop; you are born a writer' (cited in Martín Gil 2001: 38). She also distinguishes, reasonably enough, between the literature of personal and social protest and 'good' writing:

A woman who writes often does it in order to claim her rights and even her little failures in life, and that is alright. But a born writer does not just do that. The frustrations and issues she writes about are not hers, but every man's or woman's. (Cited in Martín Gil 2001: 38)

For Matute,

[literature] is creation, it is recreation, it is a process. It is a form of protest that doesn't need to be political or social; it can even be against you [...]. There are men, women and children whose stories we need to tell, and this is even more awful. We will always be protesting on behalf of those who are abused and neglected. (Ibid.)

Her literary project is a social one, and one that acknowledges the different social positions of men, women, and children, so it is interesting that, in an interview with Josefina Aldecoa for the *ABC*, both are dismissive of what they describe as the 'injustices writer': 'There are now female writers who speak about their experience, about the bad times they went through, but being a writer is something else' (Astorga 2000: 56).

Social injustice

Highlighting its consciousness-raising properties, Ana María Matute has defined literature as 'a sort of red light that shines in the consciousness of readers and leads them to lay out questions, complaints and reflections' (Doyle 1985: 238). She sees literature as an art form that allows both writers and readers to elaborate 'their own protest, their own doubt or assertion' (Doyle 1985: 238), and agrees with critics who consider writing a form of (specifically female) protest against Spanish society:

They said I was destroying social values, destroying the family, destroying religion... In a way, it was actually true. I wanted to change everything. It was a scream for freedom from a young woman against a world that seemed fake, hypocritical, exploitative and deceitful. (Gazarian 1997: 91)

The censorship in place at the beginning of Matute's literary career made it particularly difficult for writers to denounce social situations that might

compromise their supposed allegiance to the regime. However, in his prologue to the 2011 edition of Matute's *Los Abel*, Víctor Fuentes remarks that the first indications of a postwar literary rebelliousness intimately linked to the condemnation of social injustice can be found in two novels by women: Carmen Laforet's *Nada* [Nothing] and Matute's *Los Abel* (Fuentes in Matute 2011: xii). In the same prologue, he also commends Jenny Fraai's (2003) choice of these two novels as examples of 'rebeldía camuflada' [rebelliousness in disguise] (2001: xi–xii).

Although these two women writers were still the exception, the twentieth century witnessed the arrival of a number of women who began, from the award of the Premio Nadal to Laforet's *Nada* in 1944, to open a new chapter in the history of Spanish literature. Important female names, such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda or Emilia Pardo Bazán, come to mind in the context of nineteenth-century Spanish literature, but it was not until the 1940s that the success of a number of women writers in literary competitions adds significant numbers to this very small selection of female names. Subsequent Nadal Prizes were awarded to Elena Quiroga's *Viento del norte* [Wind of the North] (1950), Dolores Medio's *Nosotros los Riveros* [We, The Riveros] (1951), Luisa Forellat's *Siempre en capilla* [Always in the Chapel] (1953), Carmen Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos* [Behind the Curtains] (1957), and Ana María Matute's *Primera memoria* [First Memory] (1959) during the postwar period (Alchazidu 2001: 32–3). Prior to receiving this award, Matute had also twice been a semi-finalist in the Nadal Prize with *Los Abel* (1948) and *Luciérnagas* [Fireflies] (1949). Although *Luciérnagas* was written in 1949 and became a finalist in that year's Premio Nadal, the authorized version, titled *En esta tierra* [In this Land], was published only in 1955 after undergoing drastic cuts by censors. Indeed, the original version was only eventually published in 1993.

In *Panorama de escritoras españolas* [Overview of Spanish Women Writers], Cristina Ruiz Guerrero discusses these women authors as 'the first generation of female Spanish authors in the post-war era' (Ruiz Guerrero 1997: 165). She notes that all come from wealthy families and were able to study for university degrees, and that their literary treatment of the role of women in society involves the representation of social barriers and the need to effect social change (Ruiz Guerrero 1997: 165–6). Of course, a similar

preoccupation with social barriers and the need for social change can be found in the work of preeminent male writers of this era, such as Luis Martín Santos' *Tiempo de silencio* [Time of Silence] (1962), while certain works, for example, Juan Marsé's *La oscura historia de la prima Montse* [The Dark Story of Cousin Montse] (1970), also explore the changing role of women in postwar Spain. Nonetheless, renowned critics such as Alchazidu (2001), Ruiz Guerrero (1997), and Alicia Redondo Goicoechea (2009) make particular mention of the presence of rebellious female characters in novels by this first generation of postwar women writers:

It is fair to say that the heroines of these female authors were teenagers who had to go through a series of adversities, who are linked to a specific social environment that generates an endless number of conflicts that, in turn, are the cause of their estrangement. It is the need to stand against patterns they deem unacceptable that leads them to a negative stance that, in the end, turns into open rebelliousness. (Alchazidu 2001: 34)

The literary link between rebellious children and adolescents in Matute's work and that of her female contemporaries is not limited to Spain. Prominent critic Saliha Zerrouki (2006) has also established links between the Algerian writer Assia Djebar's *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* [Children of the New World] (1962) and Matute's *Los hijos muertos* (1959). Examining how these novels depict human suffering in war, Zerrouki remarks that, while these writers belong to different continents and cultures, there are clear similarities in their denunciation of the destructiveness of war. Matute's literary style has also been analysed by other academic studies that support the notion of a literary similarity in works by women that might justify the use of the 'women's writing' label (see, for example, Lee-Bonanno (1987)). Freixas (2008) links Matute with prominent women authors from different cultures and historical periods such as Virginia Woolf and Clarisse Lispector, arguing that as well as providing 'models of women writers', their writing demonstrates clear differences between female literature and male literature (Freixas in *El Mundo* 2009b). Redondo Goicoechea posits, likewise, that similarities exist in the writing of women as diverse as Santa Teresa de Jesús and Carmen Martín Gaité, and that the fact that these can be characterized as a style that, like Matute's, is linked to sex and gender:

It's about giving importance to silence and to the unexpected, to the unseen. This entails the need to break with the logical syntax and order, and writing with great silences, blanks and ellipses. This type of writing [...] does not spring up only from thought but also from passion and desire, and its fruits are related above all to sexuality and sensuality; with singing and dancing and their rhythmic repetition systems, which are more circular and horizontal rather than vertical and linear; with adjectives and emotions. (Redondo Goicoechea 2001: 203–4)

With this list of characteristics traditionally associated with women rather than men (emotion, sensuality, and intuition), Redondo Goicoechea concurs with mainstream feminist criticism that these features, also present in Matute's work, corroborate notions of gender and sex difference in literature and language. Similarly, Fraai argues that common themes in Matute's work – silence, the use of nature to symbolize freedom, the representation of women as a minor, and recurrent use of symbols of confinement – are paradigmatic of so-called 'women's writing' (Fraai 2003: 164–5). Notwithstanding, Matute, as discussed later, reiterates her sense of literary estrangement from her female peers.

An 'unusual' writer

Matute has repeatedly defined herself as 'a peculiar girl' (in Arenas 2008), and she uses this image to qualify both her experience of childhood and her writing:

You need to keep in mind that I was weird for the literary scene at the time; I have to admit that I was, just like I had always been as a young girl, a weird girl, and I have been the weirdo in everything I've done, also among my siblings, I was the weirdo, I was the weirdo! (Ayuso Pérez 2007)

In conversation with Marie-Lise Gazarian, she reminisces on her childhood and adolescence, and discusses her sense of isolation when in the company of other girls and women. Matute attributes this sense of alienation to her rejection of the sense that 'in that bourgeois environment, so stupid, women could only be destined to be good wives and good mothers' (Gazarian 1997: 79). While she depicts her relationship with her father as unusually

positive ('I had a wonderful relationship with my father', *ibid.*: 60), her lack of interest in the traditional female role as the submissive mother and housewife may well have been affected by her own experience of the mother–daughter bond: 'I only recall [my mum] ever kissing me twice in my life' (*ibid.*: 61). Fuentes draws a parallel between this early estrangement from women and Matute's self-declared estrangement from female literary influence, although he does find it paradoxical that

[i]n an author who has done so much to increase the value of women's writing by placing them on the very first line, the feeling of sisterhood vis-à-vis women is not present in her writing, neither is the strong tie of matriarchal lines, so distinctive of so much female literature. (Fuentes in Matute 2011: xviii)

It is interesting that, in 2011, Fuentes still feels able to express such concern for Matute's lack of affiliation with her female peers, but it does help to illustrate one of the many factors that play a part in the resistance of writers like Matute to the question of gender difference in writing. Fuentes' comment, presumably unconsciously, exemplifies the gender prejudice that continues to affect academic writing about women. His (extra-literary) concern for her sense (or not) of 'sisterhood' is not an issue that, as far as I can ascertain, is ever raised in interviews with her male peers. Unlike the critics discussed above, and also influenced, perhaps, by her membership of the Academy, Fuentes finds no traces of a female influence on her work, situating her writing within the major postwar literary genre of the literature of social protest. While this is clearly a very positive response to her work, it does raise unexplored questions about the effects of the Franco regime on 'women's writing'.

Mainstream feminist literary criticism argues that 'women's writing' may be characterized by the anxiety-inducing choices to which women writers have historically been subject. Carmen María Matías López and Philippe Campillo note that

[i]n a way, it may be admitted that female writing is a result of a certain position of women in society. If the place that women hold in society can be defined by its changing character (from events that affect their social situation to representations and value judgements on this regard) this uncertainty and these changes confirmed in different ages and civilizations would be based on the predicament of the notion of femininity. (Matías López and Campillo 2009)

If, as they suggest, any attempt to consider ‘women’s writing’ is inevitably complicated by the difficulty of defining femininity across different historical periods and cultures, then the particular status of women during the Franco dictatorship should be taken into account. Matute’s description of herself as isolated and unusual (‘rara’) is particularly indicative of this historical period, and she herself relates this sense of isolation to her rejection (within her writing) of the social role offered to women of her class in this particular historical context. Within Spain her writing, from her early novels onwards, was, as Víctor Fuentes points out a ‘precursor of women’s liberation that took place in the 1960s and 1970s in Spanish society’ (Fuentes in Matute 2011: xvi). Within Spain, Matute was the exception. However the rejection in her work of the Francoist ideal of the passive mother and housewife has clear links with the work of women writing outside Spain, the best-known example of which would be Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), published in France decades earlier. Although there are obvious reasons why writers like Fuentes, and Matute herself, regard her work as existing in isolation from her female peers, their reasons for so doing are intimately linked to her historical context and to the literary and personal isolation that Spanish writers, and particularly Spanish women writers, endured during the early years of the Franco regime.

As Georgette Ndour points out, postwar censorship presented a major obstacle for Spanish writers: ‘It was extremely damaging as it would block one of the essential requirements of artistic creation: freedom in the conception and production of work’ (2010: 80). And, as Carmen Martín Gaité explains, this censorship also extended to university syllabi, resulting in students being deprived access to any national and foreign works that could be seen as a threat to the Francoist interests.

Spanish literature syllabi for university students, which were lengthily focused on cloak and sword dramas – despised by Aldecoa – only rarely and cautiously took a brief look at the eighteenth century, because the stink of the Encyclopédie could leak through the crack [...] But, of course, they would never include the nineteenth century [...] Any article, story or play that would throw citizens from clouds of glitter to the ground of reality, or that would encourage them to question what was seen or heard, would be branded as negative. (Martín Gaité 1994: 46–8)

The covert communication of social protest via the use of symbolism and metaphor was achieved by talented writers of this generation, such as Camilo José Cela, Carmen Laforet, and Matute herself. However, their isolation and distance from so many of the major liberal and left-wing writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth century necessarily had an impact on their work:

Instead, a consumer sub-literature developed. And this was extremely damaging for Spanish society as a whole, but even more damaging for writers. Young writers born in pre-war times or in the first post-war years would be prevented from learning the most important part of the European oeuvre, intellectual motivation would be beyond their reach, and they would be condemned in advance to start from a state of literature that was already obsolete in many countries. (Rico 1980: 58)

In this climate, Matute's sense of emotional and literary isolation is understandable, as is the fact that she felt a closer sense of alliance with the predominantly male writers of her generation, than with women writers *per se*. After all, the postwar literary and intellectual gatherings were mostly frequented by men. For instance, in his memoirs, when recalling his *tertulias* [literary gatherings] with Ortega y Gasset in the 1950s, Julián Marías, a preeminent Spanish philosopher associated with the Generation of 36 movement, does not mention a single woman attending them (Marías 2008: 357–9). Likewise, Martín Gaité's memories of her literary gatherings in the 'Free University of Gambrinus, a five o'clock gathering at a renowned restaurant in 7 Zorrilla street, where we would get together to talk about more or less philosophical books' (Martín Gaité 1994: 33) highlight how male participants significantly outnumbered the female ones. Thus, Eva Forest and Martín Gaité herself were often the only *contertulias* [female companions] at these events, which were attended by such writers as Francisco Pérez Navarro, Víctor Sánchez de Zavala, Miguel Sánchez Mazas, Luis Martín-Santos, and Juan Benet. It is notable that the two women both had partners, to whom they would be married by 1955 – Martín Gaité to Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio in 1954, and Forest to Alfonso Sastre in 1955 – who were also key names in that literary circle, and this probably facilitated their acceptance as part of the group at a time when *contertulias* were scarce.

All these writers were directly affected by the experience of the Civil War in their childhoods, and, as Aldecoa points out, this experience heightened a sense of *hermandad* [sisterhood] that made no particular concession to gender:

When we were still very young we witnessed the tragedy of a war between brothers. As a result, in one way or another, our work does neither liberate us from that drama, nor from the unforgettable experience of growing up in a landscape of chipped paint walls – old values were cracking, high-sounding concepts were getting old, like threadbare tapestry around us, vestiges of an old splendour doomed to disappear. Inside the ruins of the old lessons, between bombed walls, we, who later became writers, find it difficult to let go of this memory. This, I suspect, led us – in different forms, different personalities, and different sensitivities – to the same attitude towards life and towards literature. (Aldecoa 1970: 9)

Matute states that her novels are not autobiographical ('I have very rarely written any biographical material, at least consciously, about my life'; Gazarian 1997: 36), though she does admit that her personal obsessions and concerns can be found in her fiction: 'But one cannot put aside one's obsessions, so one will write about them; since it makes one worry, it will be personal, because one is present in one's books' (ibid.). The Spanish Civil War is clearly one of these concerns, and she describes the way that 'Civil War marked my childhood and adolescence. I turned eleven not long after it started. Those were eye-opening years. I lived them in Barcelona. I still dream about the air raids' (Cavallé 2007).

However, as Ndour notes, Matute does not herself associate her writing with any literary trend, not even with those peers with whom she shares the experience of this historical event (2010: 93). Her date of birth and the publication dates of her novels classify her as one of the 'generación del medio siglo' [mid-century generation], alongside writers like Miguel Delibes and Camilo José Cela, but prominent Spanish literary critics, such as Santos Sanz Villanueva and Gonzalo Sobejano, agree that her style differs from the objective realism characteristic of this group:

Matute, who is undoubtedly a member of the mid-century generation, frequently talks about social causes and adopts a critical stand, but her tendency to fiction, the importance of very imaginative subjectivism in her work, keep her away from the usual ways of social aesthetics. (Sanz Villanueva 1980: 326)

Matute does not attribute this to gender (Ayuso Pérez 2007), and Redondo Goicoechea argues that although Matute might not have written like her male peers, her writing is also unlike that of her female peers:

Her works are not limited to familiar topics and low murmuring sounds, but they are high-flying and provide a global and tragic vision of human life, wrapped in the knowledge of a great author who is able to gather history and poetry in one novel. (Redondo Goicoechea 2009: 141)

Indeed, although Matute's style may be difficult to classify, there are other female writers of her generation whose novels do not limit their concerns to the sphere of the family. Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (1944) is a novel of gothic estrangement that mirrors the sense of existential alienation of its young protagonist Andrea, while Carmen Martín Gaité's novel *El balneario* [The Bath House], which won the *Premio Café Gijón* in 1954, is clearly not confined to domestic *murmillos* [whispers], providing, rather, a mysterious, almost frighteningly oppressive atmosphere that serves as a metaphor for the sense of entrapment that prompts the protagonist's questioning of her future and her place in this world. Rather than dealing with 'whispers', this appears to be a universal theme which provides readers with a global and timeless vision of life. Neither of these texts could be described as domestic *murmillos* and both denounce the misery and the sense of entrapment suffered by many in Spain in the post-Civil War period, regardless of gender.

A minor genre

As shown at the beginning of this section, Matute claims to regard questions of 'literature' as an aspect of writing with which she is not, herself, concerned.

Although she was the third woman to be elected a member of the RAE, and had been the recipient of both the Miguel de Cervantes (2010) and Premio Nacional de las Letras Españolas (2007) prizes, prominent Spanish critics such as Eugenio de Nora continued to question her right to be considered alongside truly important writers (Ndour 2010: 203). Without specifying names, Matute has recognized that among those who

acclaim her work today are those critics who were initially opposed to her literary style, and, in particular, to the use of fantasy in her novels (Doyle 1985: 240–1). Matute attributes this to her approach being ahead of her time:

I must say that I was not particularly spoiled by critics, not at least until much later [...] Of course, I used to write in a way that was not common back then. I believe I was ahead of my time for a long time, and I was still ahead of my time afterwards.

Those who used to say ‘like the great Ana María Matute used to say’... You are a liar! I kept your reviews! I used to keep them all, liar! But I don’t say anything anymore. Anyway... what did I care! All I was interested in was my book, not what they would say.... (Ayuso Pérez 2007)

Interestingly, one of the subjects which divided the critics in relation to Matute’s work focused on her children’s tales. Matute has published twenty-seven collections of children’s stories, which have achieved reputable literary awards such as the Nadal, Planeta, Fastenrath, Lazarillo, and Cervantes prizes. Furthermore, as Etxebarria reminds us in ‘Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura de mujeres’ [With Our Own Voice. In Favour of Women’s Literature], it was Matute’s tales that brought her to the attention of both students and a wider Spanish readership:

I was forced to read the works of Camilo José Cela and Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio when I was in primary school. Rosa Chacel was not even mentioned in my textbooks. Ana María Matute was there, but only mentioned as an author of stories ‘for children’. I only found out she had written novels when I was twenty. (Etxebarria 2000b: 110)

Etxebarria includes this information as part as her denunciation of the fact that, until recently, most Spanish female writers did not appear on school and university syllabuses. Even when, exceptionally, as in the case of Matute, her writings were included, they were sidelined to a minor literary genre, as Matute has noted herself with some disapproval on a number of occasions: ‘In my time, right at the beginning, not now, some important writers would say to me: “Why do you do this, if it’s a minor genre?”’ (quoted in Ayuso Pérez 2007). Redondo Goicoechea points out that these

tales were unanimously commended by critics, but she does question the reason for this: 'A very different attitude was adopted by critics with regards to her children's books, which they praised from the beginning, perhaps because, being a minor genre, they wouldn't require stylistic perfection in line with the canons or... was it because a minor genre was the right place for a woman?' (2009: 143).

'Women's writing'?

Matute does not believe a distinction should be made between male and female writing; only between good or bad literature. She does not publicly explore (insofar as I have been able to discover) the complex issue of who is to rule on the 'good' and the 'bad', what criteria might be used, or what role is played in our interpretation of these qualities by historical and/or political circumstance. She thus avoids examining in depth the reasons behind the fact that certain authors and national literatures gain preference during a particular historical period, while some long-acclaimed writers are forgotten as others, such as herself, take their place. Matute is nonetheless aware, based on some of the comments cited above vis-à-vis the reception of her own work, that the canonization of literature cannot simply be reduced to the existence of 'good' and 'bad' texts: it is a selective procedure, symptomatic of, and subject to, particular historical, cultural, and ideological, not to mention financial, criteria. Matute began her literary career in the post-Civil War period, when questions such as these took second place to the questions of aesthetics and the politics of the Franco regime. Carmen Martín Gaité explains:

When the Spanish Civil War was over [...] what seemed to keep the Spanish government most concerned was to artificially uphold a moral of victory, to spread the enthusiasm [...] And this nuisance continued until well into the 1950s [...] This cover-up of reality contributed to the publishing of exotic novels, located in distant settings and places, that seemed to be wrapped by a blur, where events bore no relation whatsoever to what we saw around us [...] It goes without saying that works from authors of the Generation of '98 were rarely republished. (1994: 46–8)

Matute's reception has changed over time from that of a writer of marginal genres to a member of the Academy, and she now works in a field that is recognized as intrinsically linked to the demands of the market.

Her rejection of the term 'women's writing' and her response to writing by women reflect own historical context. This predates debate on the extent to which the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' can be interpreted as social constructs. If we assume that the term *literatura femenina* [women's writing] refers both to 'female' (written by a women) and 'feminine' (giving precedence to domesticity and nurturing) literature, we find that under the dictatorship and coinciding with the publication of many of Matute's novels, *literatura femenina* connoted a prescriptive form of literature that might be written by male or female authors, but was aimed exclusively at reflecting the role of women promoted by the ideology of the regime. Thus, the genre 'women's writing' would include moral treatises such as *El libro de las margaritas* (a manual written for girls seven to ten who belonged to the *Sección Femenina*), popular magazines, such as *Medina* and *Teresa* (associated with the *Sección Femenina*), and numerous examples of the *novela rosa* [romantic novels] such as María Romero Jusén's *Media boda y un marido* [A Half Wedding and a Husband] (1945), Enrique Martínez Fariñas' *Razas opuestas* [Opposing Races] (1959), or Manuel Prados y López's *Luz de mujer* [A Woman's Light] (1950), from which the following, illustrative extract is taken:

I knew that María Victoria would trust Fernando. I admired the mettle of that heroic, cautious, extremely loyal woman enlightened by her hope. I suspected Fernando did not notice any of this, and he didn't even remember his deep commitment. And, ultimately, I would marvel at how such violent, unstable and equivocal situations would last for so long. Neither did María Victoria claim her right, because she undoubtedly expected love to be repaired, as something that would come sooner or later, nor did he give any importance to his past, as if everything previous to his military life had died in Africa...

When Fernando noticed his wife's humility, he gloated in his infidelities, which he previously found so pleasant, and he tore down the veil of shame that unfaithful men normally use to cover their misdemeanors. Far from taking it as a reprimand, his wife's softness would encourage him to smile and to forgive himself for his own flings, relieving him from the violence of pretense and white lies. (Prados y López 1950: 9)

As this text by a male author illustrates, literature associated with 'women's writing' is not exclusively produced by women writers, and it is not difficult to understand Matute's reluctance to consider the question, nor to understand her point that we should prioritize questions of aesthetics (of 'good' and 'bad' literature) over gender. Women writers of her generation have been understandably reluctant to have their works catalogued in the sub-genre of 'women's writing', as well as being highly conscious of the negative connotations of the association with the *novela rosa* and the conservative moral agenda of the regime (reproduced in the publications of the *Sección Femenina*).

Contemporary debates on 'women's writing' encompass far wider parameters: from discussions of the sex of the writer, to the acceptance or rejection of a particular hegemonic social order, and identification with, or isolation from gender role models. 'Women's writing' remains a complex term. Some would argue for only including literature with a feminist agenda in this category, while others would include any text that focuses on (biological and/or situational) female experience. Some would argue that the term should only be used for fiction written by women, while theorists such as Kristeva would interpret this as overly reductive. Matute's work clearly subverts traditional female roles (she was, as discussed previously, accused of attacking the institution of the family in her early fiction). Her work could, therefore, be easily accommodated under any of these interpretations of 'women's writing'. However, it is also understandable that she would resist identification with a label that is at once so porous and, for her generation in particular, so fraught with the conservative ideology of the regime.

The answer Matute provides to a question about her experience as a member of the Academy illustrates her position quite clearly: 'Very good. I have not found anything strange. Anyway, I am sure there will be more admissions of women' (Cavallé 2007). This response is straightforwardly positive, but it contains a certain element of disavowal. Although Matute does not regard her situation as odd, she is (as a member of a tiny minority) in an odd situation. She was correct in her prediction, as eight more women have joined the Academy since her arrival in 1998. This is the kind of 'no-nonsense' approach that has served her well in a situation that is

both *nada extraño* and absolutely *rara* (to go back to the word she uses to describe herself, as a child and as a woman writer). Her attitude is typical of a successful woman educated during this era of strict (and strictly gendered) social, political, religious and cultural control, but what is interesting, as explored in the next section on Montero, is how this deeply rooted disdain for the ‘feminine’ prevails.

Montero on ‘Women’s Writing’

In her article ‘Tropical como en el trópico: Rosa Montero y el “Boom” femenino hispánico de los ochenta’ [Tropical as in the Tropics: Rosa Montero and the ‘Boom’ in Female Hispanic Writers in the 1980s], Susana Reisz notes that features shared by the Spanish-speaking women writers who became well known in the 1980s and make up the ‘Boom’ include: previous work in journalism, unusual success with their first novel, and popular recognition, both of their work and their public personality (1995: 192). Among them are Spanish and Latin American authors such as Montero, Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, and Ángeles Mastretta.

She also notes that their writing attracted the rather lukewarm praise illustrated in the following review of Montero’s *Amado amo* [Beloved Master] (1988): ‘There are no displays or epiphanies in *Amado amo* that could ambush us in a so-called literary wonder. Just as the old *cliché* says: it can easily be read, causing the occasional gentle smile’ (*Antena Semanal* 1988: 26). Despite this, these women did achieve popular success with their first novels and, over the years, critical reception warmed to the more challenging and innovative aspects of their work. An example of this tendency was a review of Montero’s *Lágrimas en la lluvia* [Tears in Rain] (2011), which was intended for a similar readership to that targeted by the negative comment cited in the text above:

The plot is correctly driven, although it might be too simple, but what really captures you is the way Husky faces her solitude, the reality of knowing that her childhood

memories, that her mother and father are an artificial memory inserted in her head, and how the certainty of death prevents her from enjoying life with the happy unawareness of human beings. This is an apparently light novel but it has very solid and intense moments. Bruna Husky becomes a character with an overwhelming physical strength but a vast internal fragility full of contradiction [...]. Husky becomes one of those beings who is part of the gallery of extraordinary beings whom one is lucky to have met, be they real, fictional or technohuman. One initially wonders if it's a realist or science fiction novel, but in the end you realize that it actually belongs to the more important narrative genre of emotionally moving novels. (Iturbe 2011b)

This shift is not entirely unexpected. As shown in the previous section on Matute, critics are often cautious in their assessment of 'new' art forms, and the publication of Spanish-language literature on this scale by women could indeed have been considered a 'new' art form.

Although their critical reception has improved, these writers are still frequently asked for their views on 'women's writing'. Here Rosa Montero's views on the topic will be examined. The main sources for this account include comments published in interviews Montero has given over the years, her own summary of this issue in *La loca de la casa* (2003), and the publication of *El amor de mi vida* [The Love of My Life] (2011), a collection of critical essays on literature that were originally published in *El País* between 1998 and 2010.

To date, few academic studies have addressed Montero's opinion of the 'women's writing' label, and none appears to have focused on the contradictory aspects of this opinion that support Henseler's view of the label as 'double-edged' (2003a). Elena Gascón Vera's pioneering essay, 'Rosa Montero ante la escritura femenina' [Rosa Montero on women's writing] (1987), aims to establish whether *Crónica del desamor* (1979), *La función Delta* [The Delta Function] (1981), and *Te trataré como a una reina* [I'll Treat You Like a Queen] (1983) could be said to conform to a Cixousian notion of 'écriture féminine'. Kristin A. Kiely's thesis 'Female subjective strategies in post-Franco Spain as presented by Rosa Montero and Lucía Etxebarria' (2008), puts the question of literary merit to one side, to focus on a list of topics she considers a women writer should address, an approach that, perhaps unfortunately, recurs in numerous interviews in which Montero has been questioned on the existence of 'women's writing' (see, for example, *El Tiempo.com* 2011; and Gómez

2003). My own theoretically informed approach will differ from these in the sense that instead of analysing Montero's texts and its protagonists for traces of a feminist ideology, I shall focus Montero's often contradictory comments on the notion of 'women's writing'.

The following pages examine what might be considered a discrepancy between Montero's description of herself as a feminist and her rejection of the notion of gender difference in writing. This discrepancy is highlighted by the separation she establishes between the need to promote feminist ideas and her objection to feminist literature. Her most frequently expressed ideas, and those on which her views are most subject to change, can be divided into four distinct areas: questions of gender difference; critical treatment of work by women authors; the difference between feminist and female writers; and the need for women writers to contribute to the fictional depiction of a world that is populated by men and women.

Over the years, Montero has been unequivocal in her rejection of the 'women's writing' label. In a piece originally published in *El País Semanal* (2 May 1999),¹ she stated:

I have absolute certainty that there is no such thing as female literature. That is, women do not write in a different way to men, or at least our difference is not objectifiable. Every writer writes from what they are: their dreams, their language, their social class, their readings, their life experiences, and, of course, their sexual gender too. That is, men write from the fact of being men, and women write from the fact of being women. But sexual gender is only one of the many ingredients in a writer's perspective, like, for instance, the fact of having been born in a big city or in the countryside. (2011: 217)

Clearly, Montero regards gender as just one of many components that contribute to the way a writer sees and describes the world; a component that is no more significant than age, social status, religion, cultural context, or sexual orientation. A number of her contemporaries share this opinion: Carmen Posadas, for instance, points out that 'In my view, everything that surrounds us determines how we write' (*Diario de Navarra* 2008). Montero is quite firm in her affirmation above that 'our difference is not

1 See also Escribano (2000) and Rabí do Carmo (2003).

objectifiable'. However, this interesting and, no doubt, factually correct point of view, is one that she regularly contradicts in her own writing on literature in general, and on 'women's literature' in particular.

'Women's writing': Writing for women, or writing by women?

In the following extract from *El amor de mi vida*, in a piece that originally appeared in *El País Semanal* in May 2000, Montero discusses *Las mil y una noches* [A Thousand and One Nights], arguing for the possibility of female authorship:

In Vernet's view, the non-sexist parts of *One Thousand and One Nights* come from stories that originated in Indochina, where there was a strong matriarchal culture. I believe many of the tales in *One Thousand and One Nights* were written by women. The new feminist theory of literature holds the view that probably a great part of the anonymous texts in the history of literature are the works of women whose authorship was not recognized on the grounds of them being women. This sounds quite reasonable and possible, even more so in the case of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is a collection of tales that were initially *oral storytelling, modest narrations, private, imbued with an aroma of domesticity and a liking for fantasy* that is so often disdainfully associated with women. (2011: 261, my emphasis)

Despite her belief that the difference between writing by women and men is not 'objectivable', Montero speculates here on what could be considered gender-specific grounds (that these tales are from an oral tradition, that they are modest intimate narratives and that they are impregnated with the 'aroma' of domesticity and of taste for the fantastic). This association of female authorship with such a gender-specific set of attributes sits uncomfortably with her rejection of 'women's writing'. These attributes (oral, modest, intimate, domestic, and fantastic) are, after all, the attributes highlighted both by those who are critical of 'women's writing' and by its advocates. This group includes both critics aligned with what is often reductively referred to as the 'Anglo-American' tradition of feminist criticism and fellow Spanish writers Laura Freixas (Marqués 2012), the novelist, Etxebarria, and critics such as Adelaida Martínez (1999) and Luiza Lobo (2000).

In *La loca de la casa* (2003), Montero notes that she has been questioned about the existence, or not, of ‘women’s literature’ in interviews and at literary discussions and events. As elsewhere (and as noted above), Montero’s view is that, when it comes to literature written by women, gender is just one of many different influences acting upon the writer:

The sex is only one of the many ingredients in a male or female writer’s view. A writer is who he or she is and books are what they are depending on their language, their culture, their age, their readings, their social class, the illnesses they’ve suffered or not suffered, and also on their sex too, on the fact of being a man or a woman, etc. As you can see, it’s impossible to label a type of literature only because it’s been made by a woman or a man. (2003: 173)

Her interview in *El camino de las palabras* [The Path of Words] (reprinted in *La loca de la casa*) also makes it clear that she continues to find the topic, and the continued segregation of women writers irritating:

Women are still discussed in symposia as a different chapter, a short paragraph annexed to the main conference (‘And, with regards to women’s literature...’); we are barely featured in anthologies, in brainy academic articles, in end-of-year or end-of-decade or end-of-century summaries that are released on the media every once in a while. We are not sufficiently represented in academia, in encyclopaedias, and we are not normally asked to carry out serious presentations in international conferences. Critics are often tremendously paternalistic and show a worrying tendency to mix up the life of a female writer with her work (something that never happens to their male counterparts), to identify an indulgent, actionless literature in every novel written by a woman (even if it’s the most exciting thriller) and, of course [...] to think that all that a woman writes about is exclusively related to women and is, therefore, second-class human and literary material. (2003: 173)

Here, Montero confirms a view expressed by other women writers about the way their work is received by a critical establishment traditionally dominated by men. As discussed in Chapter 1, like Montero, women writers of different generations such as Elena Santiago (born in 1941) and Paula Izquierdo (born in 1961) highlight the fact that most male critics and editors are still influenced by this tradition – and the two former even suggest that the habit of distinguishing between male and female literature may, by now, simply be the result of cynical marketing strategies (Henseler 2003a: 42, 122).

Montero's belief that female writers do not receive the same treatment as male writers (and she would extend this view to the response of critics, event planners, academics and journalists) is, therefore, a belief shared with women both a generation older and a generation younger than her. Montero also accepts evidence, albeit anecdotal, that there is a marked difference between the attitude of men and women towards their own writing:

I have a few male writer friends who think about posterity. They are intelligent, charming, and not even excessively narcissistic guys, but they do suffer from the small vanity of believing that their work will live on, and many of them even try to get ready for this, organizing their manuscripts and filing their notes. It is a childish ambition that, oddly enough, I have only encountered in men [...]. It might be that we women are genetically more protected from the painful distress of death because of our ability to give birth and to perpetuate ourselves. ([2008] 2011: 175)

This comment, originally published in *Babelia* on 27 September 2008, is a slight twist on the assumption, more commonly expressed by male writers, that the publication of a book is in some way equivalent to giving birth (in other words, that the literary work, forms the metaphorical function of 'reproducing' oneself for posterity). However, it is striking to see a woman who has repeatedly rejected the notion of gender difference in writing so comfortable with the notion of biological difference in attitudes towards writing. I highlight this here to indicate that Montero's rejection of the 'women's writing' label does not, paradoxically, prevent her from sharing many of the same views of those who champion the label, nor of those who dismiss women's writing, precisely because it is different from that of men.

One reason for Montero's aversion to the label is that she clearly senses that a paternalistic critical tradition associates 'women's writing' with literature that has female protagonists, that deals with 'women's issues' and that is aimed at a female readership:

Official criticism, official culture, academics, universities, national awards, and the whole circuit of literary mandarins are still granting preeminence to men. And then there's the unconscious sexism of the whole society; prejudices make everybody (female readers included) think that, when a woman writes a novel with a female

protagonist, she is writing about women. I don't have a particular interest in writing about women; I write about humankind, but fifty-one per cent of that is made up of women. (Cited in Santoro 2011)

And she qualifies this as follows:

When a woman writes a novel with a female protagonist, everybody thinks she is talking about women; meanwhile, when a man writes a novel with a male protagonist, everybody thinks he is writing about humankind. (2003: 170)

This statement, made at an international 'women's literature' symposium at the University of Lima in 1999, is perhaps the most important of all the declarations Montero has made on the topic. She has consistently asserted that the preponderance of women characters in her works, far from being a direct consequence of her interest in targeting women *readers*, is simply a natural consequence of both her identity as a woman *writer* and of the fact that the majority of the world's citizens are women:

I do not have any interest whatsoever in writing about women. I want to write about humankind, but it just so happens that fifty-one per cent of humankind is female; and since I belong to this group, most of my absolute protagonists are women, just like male novelists normally use male main characters. (2003: 170)

In *Women in the Workplace: Four Spanish Novels by Women 1979–1998*, Catherine Bourland Ross remarks upon the rapid increase in Spanish women in the workplace in the past century (2005: 1). In 1930, only nine per cent of the Spanish female population worked (a low percentage due to the worldwide depression); in 1982, thirty per cent of Spanish women worked, and this grew to over thirty-six per cent by 1992 (Garrido (ed.), et al. 1997: 504–56). Extending this phenomenon to the literary field, Montero explains that the emergence of a considerable number of women writers after the fall of the Franco regime is a natural consequence of the normalization and subsequent enrichment of Spanish narrative (Rabí do Carmo 2003). Nowadays, literary series and anthologies dedicated to women writers, such as *Narradoras españolas de la transición política* [Spanish Women Narrative Writers During the Transition] (Nieva de la Paz 2004b), and *Novelas breves de escritoras españolas* [Short Novels

by Spanish Women Writers] (Ena Bordonada 1996), are more common. Similarly, there has been an increase in the number of literary prizes dedicated to women writers such as the Premio literario Mujeres del mundo rural y pesquero [Women in Rural Development and Fisheries World Literary Award], organized by the Ministerio del Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino [Ministry of Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs], or the Concurso Literario de Narrativa para Mujeres [Women's Literary Contest], organized by the Generalitat Valenciana. However, Montero resists the notion of separating Spanish women writers, and affirms that she does not feel closer to any given female than to any given male writer:

I probably have much more in common with a Spanish male author who is my age and who was born in a big city rather than with a black eighty-year-old South African female writer who lived under apartheid. Because the things that distinguish us outnumber the things that unite us. (2003: 171)

'Ese feo vicio': Female writer/female protagonist?

Montero may resist being associated with a label ('women's writing') that, for her, has negative connotations, but she is also conscious that 'women's writing' may be received differently: not only because the female protagonist does not seem to enjoy the same connotations of universal humanist appeal as the male protagonist, but because she has observed that there is a tendency to over-identify the female author with her female characters. In a comment originally published in *Babelia* on 10 October 2010, she states:

What I mean is that, when Cercas or Marías, for instance, write novels that are apparently very close to their own lives (they both visit the biographical border quite often), everybody talks about them with profound literary respect; meanwhile, some are already saying about Lindo's *Lo que me queda por vivir* that it is a book of memories, as if that would diminish its quality. I suppose it is a gender prejudice: in male novelists, the personal side tends to be seen as fiction; meanwhile, in female novelists, even the most evident fiction tends to be considered as personal. (2011: 251)

In the case of Stella Rimington's *At Risk*, Montero admitted in *Babelia* on 28 March 2009 that she could not avoid speculating on links between the protagonist and the writer:

They say writers can be divided into those whose life is more interesting than their works and those whose texts are more interesting than their lives. The main character of this novel is the thirty-something-year-old agent Liz Carlyle, on whom readers can't help practising the bad habit of looking for traces of the author when reading. (2011: 53)

Rimington was, of course, Director General of Britain's MI5 from 1992 until 1996, and Montero is not alone in indulging in speculation about how closely Rimington's own experiences reflect those of her protagonists. What is interesting about Rimington here is that she was the head of a notoriously secretive organization. Most readers, regardless of sex, would sympathize with Montero's interest in the connection between writer and protagonist in Rimington's case, but it raises interesting questions about what it is that provokes this interest and why. Could it be that, at least in part, the tendency (that Montero is not alone in noticing) to over-identify the female writer with the female protagonists might stem from a similar sense of exclusion from the mystery (mysterious, that is, for a paternalistic literary critical tradition) that has traditionally surrounded women's lives?

Of the forty-five literary works Montero discusses in *El amor de mi vida*, she only practises what she refers to as 'this ugly vice' with reference to women authors who, like Stella Rimington and Fred Vargas, happen to have led very unusual lives (Fred Vargas is the pseudonym used by Frédérique Audoin-Rouzeau, a historian, archaeologist and crime fiction writer), and it might be interesting, although beyond the scope of the present study to examine more closely the extent to which we all (whether as writers of fiction or criticism) resort to stereotyping in precisely those situations in which we are least familiar with our subject. It is certainly true that Montero's response to Fred Vargas, first published in *Babelia* on 31 May 2008, comes very close to mimicking exactly the kind of response she deplores in the male critic: 'She, Fred [Vargas] must be like this, like her books; this weird, this obsessed, sometimes pedantic, largely inconsistent and childish in her approach, crazy and definitely extravagant' (2011: 80).

'Feminist' Literature/Feminist Academia

It was above noted that, over the years, the public perception of Montero as a feminist (in response to her own explicit and controversial articulation of feminist concerns in her work) has been replaced by the perception of her as a committed, progressive journalist. Montero herself is adamant that she is not necessarily in favour of feminist literature *per se*, and she shares this view with many of her peers, such as Carme Riera (born 1948), who made the comment, 'I consider myself a feminist woman, but not a feminist writer, because while I do not write feminist pamphlets, I am committed to women's fight' (Hernando 2012). Unlike Matute, Montero is a self-declared feminist:

I consider myself a feminist, although I prefer the word anti-sexist, which seems less ambiguous to me. And I believe that being feminist or anti-sexist at the beginning of the twenty-first century is self-evident, that all men and women should be, just as we should be antiracist. (In *El Mundo* 2006)

On the other hand, despite the ongoing popularity of *Crónica del desamor*, she claims not to approve of using fiction for feminist and/or political purposes:

However, the fact that you consider yourself a feminist does not mean that your novels are. I despise utilitarian and militant fiction, feminist, environmentalist, pacifist or any other '-ist' novel that you can think about; because writing to spread a message betrays the fundamental purpose of fiction, the essential meaning: the search for meaning. Thus, one writes to learn, to know; and one cannot exactly start this journey of knowledge carrying the answers with one's self. (Montero 2003: 172)

In a piece for *El País Semanal* (4 April 1999) Montero clearly, and rightly, differentiates between bad writing that is ideologically motivated and good writing that illustrates the repression and entrapment of nineteenth-century women:

A formidable trio of ladies stands out in the history of literature; three curious, intense and tragic women who illustrate, perhaps better than any other fictional character of the time, what the nineteenth century was. I am talking about Madame Bovary (Flaubert, 1857), Anna Karénina (Tolstói, 1875-7), and Ana Ozores, 'la Regenta'

(Leopoldo Alas, 'Clarín', 1884–5); all of them beautiful and rich, all of them married and adulterous; all of them prisoners of a destiny as narrow as a grave [...] It is hardly surprising that three authors coming from such different worlds happened to have such similar arguments. *The issue was there*, monumental, beating under the surface of things. ([1999] 2011: 91, my emphasis)

She outlines what she meant more precisely in the following comment (in *Babelia*, 30 May 2009) about *The Easter Parade* and *Revolutionary Road*, by Richard Yates:

They are feminist books in the best and deepest sense of the word, because *they are not voluntarist texts and they do not depict perfect and remarkable women*; on the contrary, they portray with startling eloquence the unnecessarily cruel destiny of human beings trapped in the cobweb of prejudice. ([2009] 2011: 152–3, my emphasis)

What emerges most clearly from this is the problem with the word 'feminist'. Montero uses it both pejoratively to refer to 'bad', politicized literature and as a positive quality of 'good' literature that happens to reveal problems faced by (nineteenth-century) women. Of course, one does not have to be a feminist or a woman to write literature that illuminates the subordinate position of women. In a piece published in *El País Semanal* on 4 April 1999, she observes, 'Their sensitivity to notice this tragedy does not necessarily imply a feminist concern in the authors: all they needed was enough talent, and they [Flaubert, Tolstoy, and 'Clarín'] are great writers' ([1999] 2011: 93).

Montero's criticism of the use of literature for functional, political ends is not limited to fiction, but extends to the political intention of feminist literary criticism. While she welcomes the growing participation of female literary critics, she cautions against the kind of separatism that risks reinforcing traditional prejudice against women writers:

There are more female scholars, critics and university professors every day, and this is changing the situation; but some of these professionals insist on writing reviews, anthologies and literary studies which are outrageously feminist, that is, they are ideologised to the point of dogmatism, and they are counterproductive like sexist prejudice. Although they come from the opposite corner they also think that women only write about women. (2003: 174)

Looking again at Montero's response to Flaubert, Tolstoy, and 'Clarín' (particularly the words *el tema estaba ahí, no son textos voluntaristas ni dibujan heroínas perfectas y admirables* [the topic was just there; these are not voluntarist texts, nor do they portray perfect, remarkable heroines]), her attitude toward the question of 'women writers' becomes clear. First, although these male writers come from different countries, *el tema estaba ahí*, for Montero, the fact of female repression is a universal theme that can, and should, be approached by writers, regardless of sex and/or ideological point of view. However, Montero's remark that because Flaubert, Tolstoy, and 'Clarín' were not women or feminists their approach did not tackle the tragedy of female oppression as a feminist cause raises (unanswerable) questions as to whether she would have interpreted their work as feminist had they happened to have been born female.

Bringing a female perspective to bear on 'what surrounds us'

I want to return now to Carmen Posadas' comment, cited earlier, for the way it echoed Montero's own view that gender is simply another aspect of 'everything that surrounds us, which conditions us when writing'.² In an interview published in *El camino de las palabras*, Montero asserts that there is one thing that passionate readers and writers have in common; they both experience a kind of fissure between their own lives and reality. She suggests that the tragedy for the writer of fiction is that their eagerness for limitless adventures and experiences is frustrated by the fact that they must, after all, live a finite, limited life. For Montero, passionate readers and novelists may be more aware of their inner contradictions, and more conscious of the limitations of time and geography that fiction works to overcome. In other words, for Montero, what links both the reader and writer of fiction is the view that literature is a powerful vehicle through which our experience of life can be broadened. She explains:

2 See page 140.

The great human tragedy is to have been born possessed by a will to live and to be condemned to an ephemeral existence [...] We need to expand our living into other existences in order to compensate for the finiteness. And there is no virtual life more powerful and more hypnotizing than the one offered by literature. (2011: 14)

This quotation sums up Montero's view that fiction is a tool for our appreciation of what 'surrounds us'. Whereas for writers like Etxebarria, as shall be explored in due course, the concept of gender identification is central to their understanding and appreciation of literature, for Montero, the driving force behind our enjoyment of fiction, rather than the need for recognition, is the almost voyeuristic pleasure of looking at the world and reinterpreting it in new ways. In a comment originally published in *Babelia* (29 March 2008), she claims: 'When you are reading a novel you sneak into the characters, that is, you enter into other people's lives, which is one of the greatest journeys one can set out on' (2011: 75). Interestingly, this is the approach that links Montero, despite her resistance, most closely to advocates of the 'women's writing' label.

In order to elaborate, it should first be reiterated that, in *La loca de la casa*, Montero notes that, although literary history has been predominantly written by men and the overwhelming majority of its protagonists are male, this literature is not routinely described as 'masculinist' – in fact, it is never described as masculinist, except by feminists who wish to draw attention to this fact. She also notes that, over the years, this tradition has constructed a number of female literary models that may be the product of unconscious fantasy: 'woman as danger (the female vampire who sucks the energy and life out of a man), the earth-witch-mother woman, the little-girl-beautiful-dumb woman such as Marilyn' (2003: 176).

Unusually, while these literary stereotypes tend to be challenged by younger women writers such as Lucía Etxebarria (to be discussed in the next section), Montero suggests that rather than regarding them as damaging portrayals of femininity, they simply respond to the insight they give into male fantasy, or a particularly masculine representation of the female 'other', and, as such, should not be dismissed, as they help to enrich our (universal) understanding of the way human beings function.

For Montero, the inclusion in literature of the world that surrounds us, an aspect she describes as a motivating force for both readers and writers

of fiction, can only be considered complete when it encompasses fiction by both men and women, and, perhaps even more interestingly, at such time when the models of male characterization that women contribute to the field have been assimilated by the male reader:

As we female novelists continue to finish off that description of a world which previously existed only inside of us, we will turn it into everyone's heritage; and men [...] will try to adapt to our male prototypes, just like women try to resemble the female prototypes that men have invented. (2003: 178)

On this point, Montero concurs with writers like Marta Sanz, who consider that 'women's writing' helps to redefine our prejudices about what it is to be 'human':

We all read, and this is a fact, from our own prejudices and nobody can make any interpretations from nothingness; nevertheless, the great potential of good literature is based, to a great extent, on its ability to redefine these prejudices, to shape them into different forms and keep reading from them, assimilating readings and ultimately building our understanding and sensitivity. (Sanz in Henseler 2003b: 164)

It is worth noting that, of the forty-five novels Montero discusses in *El amor de mi vida*, many are praised for their style, but only three are praised for particular innovation of theme and character. These three are novels written by women: Mary Renault's *Funeral Games* (1981), Colette's *Chéri* (1920), and Rimington's *At Risk* (published in Spanish as *La invisible* [The Invisible Woman], 2004).

Mary Renault (1904–83) was a British writer best known for her historical novels set in ancient Greece. She was also a controversial figure: educated at Oxford and trained as a nurse, she moved from Britain to South Africa with her partner, Julie Mullard. She was against apartheid but rejected association with the developing gay pride movement and always resisted being labelled a 'gay' writer. *Funeral Games* deals with the death of Alexander the Great and the gradual disintegration of his empire. Two of the novel's elements are commended by Montero; the creation of female character Eurydice, the charismatic, ambitious and courageous granddaughter of two kings of Macedon who sought to become queen in her own right; and the inclusion of menstruation in this war-set, male-dominated plot:

When Eurydice is next speaking on the platform, she notices a moisture, a cramp, a spasm: her period is coming early. She cannot stand as queen (or, if anything, as king) stained with that ignominious blood that sends her back to her womanhood. Eurydice is an Illyrian princess; she was engaged to the dumb brother of Alexander the Great. She was educated like a man, she is the queen and wants to exercise her power, something Macedonians had never seen. (Montero 2011: 217)

Colette's *Chéri* narrates the end of a six-year affair between Léa, a retired courtesan, and her *chéri*, a pampered and much younger man. The novel has been noted generally for its reversal of gender stereotypes,³ as it is Chéri who wears silk pyjamas and Léa's pearls, and who is the object of the gaze and of desire. Montero applauds this reversal:

With precise prose and a ruthless eye, Colette was able to disembowel human feelings as if she were dissecting a tadpole; furthermore, she was the first woman to talk about love in such a way. Consequently, she was the first woman who managed to celebrate man as an object. (2011: 171)

Finally, in *Babelia* on 28 March 2009, Montero extols the way that Stella Rimington brings her knowledge of spy operations to the thriller genre, in *At Risk*. With regard to Rimington, her powerful heroine is not so unusual, but Montero's praise reflects the way that female heroines of this kind came late to Spanish publishing and tend to fall in and out of favour more quickly than similar novels with male leads. The novel's protagonist is Liz Carlyle, an MI5 intelligence officer in her thirties who receives information that a terrorist threat is looming. As well as dealing with the impending crisis, Liz also has to put up with her MI6 partner's patronizing and sexist attitude. Montero was particularly impressed by the fact that, with Liz, Rimington broke with the literary genre's traditional female roles:

Liz is fascinating and offers a powerful alternative to the male agents provided by spy fiction, and let alone to the stereotyped women these novels usually feature. Liz

- 3 The theme of a passionate relationship between an older woman and younger man (in the novel Léa is twenty-four years older than 'Chéri') is more topical today, and still controversial, and a film version of this novel was released as recently as 2009, directed by Stephen Frears and starring Michelle Pfeiffer.

is analytical, earnest, intelligent, and, at the same time, she complains that the rain is ruining her beautiful shoes. (2011: 53)

All these elements – the character that transcends the traditional literary model of the beautiful, passive princess in Ancient Greece, the explicit treatment of the natural phenomenon of menstruation, the still (over almost a century later) relatively new literary treatment of the male object of desire in the female gaze, and the introduction to the spy genre of a non-stereotypical female spy – are described by Montero as evidence that women writers are beginning to contribute new models to a collective literary imaginary that is usually defined as universal, but that has been, in practice, overwhelmingly male:

As women massively join the world of creative writing, we all contribute with new symbols to the collective imagery. Symbols springing from female intimacy, that, once released from the shadows by women, may be used by everybody [...] What I mean is that, if men menstruated, universal literature would be filled with blood metaphors. This recreation work is what the female writers of this century are carrying out: like Renault and her wretched Eurydice. (2011: 218)

Montero's point about blood imagery is particularly pertinent to any discussion of the role of the (biological) body and gender in writing and its reception, as is her point that the introduction of new themes to the collective literary imaginary, and growing number of female authors publishing fiction, should be greeted with enthusiasm by male and female readers alike.

Clearly, when we look back at the date of Colette's still-famous *Chéri* (1920), the introduction of new themes is not a recent phenomenon; however what distinguishes the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century writers is the sheer number of women authors entering the contemporary literary marketplace.⁴ In her appreciation of their contribution to litera-

4 To cite just two examples of other pioneering women writers, the specialist in literature by women, Biruté Ciplijauskaitė, cites the twentieth-century writer Oriana Fallaci's introduction of a series of motherhood-related topics that had been seldom treated in literature in *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* [Letter to a Child Never Born] (1975). These include 'the possible loss of professional skills; views on abortion; the will for independence as opposed to the social duty of giving a father to the child'. Similarly, to focus on a Spanish example, in *Flavio* (1861), the nineteenth-century

ture as a whole, Montero finds herself, perhaps unwillingly, sustaining one of the key tenets held by writers who, unlike Montero, do not reject the label 'women writer', because it allows for the specific consideration of literature written by women, for the way it introduces 'new' (in the sense that these are age-old, but generally female) characters and 'new' themes (that are also 'age-old' but not hitherto encountered in the literary arena).

Against 'women's writing'?

From the discussion above, it would seem that Montero's resistance to the label 'women's writing' is predicated on the mistaken prejudice that writing that comes under this label is either inherently political and separatist, or perceived to be only of interest to women. In Chapter 1, I noted that current trends in the literary market tend to divide the work of women writers not only between the commercially successful and critically lauded, but also between those that deal with 'universal' themes and those that pertain only to 'women'. Thus, while women writers enjoy higher visibility and marketability, their work is still often separated off into the category of 'women's writing', and considered distinct from literature that is 'universal' in its themes. Montero denounces the way that women writers are treated by the literary establishment. She deplores, especially, the fact that these works tend to be regarded as literature for a female readership concerned only with 'women's issues'. She challenges the notion of literature as a means to a political end, and separates her own feminist identification from any feminist intention in her fiction. This separation accounts for her at times irritated reaction to ongoing questioning in interviews about her thoughts on women writers. Montero's irritation reminds us that literature written by women assumes ascribed and gendered meanings as soon as it reaches the literary marketplace. My own reading of the apparent contradictions in her approach to 'women's writing' is that it is the result both of the prejudice

writer Rosalía de Castro 'posits the idea of a woman's right to an intellectual life by having Mara judged prideful for writing poetry, an activity unbecoming to decent women of the day' (Pérez and Ihrie (eds) 2002: 113).

that surrounds her (as a woman writer) and of her conviction that literature by women is essential to the completion of the literary description of a world that, until recently, has generally been 'written' by men.

Like other writers, including Almudena Grandes, Espido Freire, and Dulce Chacón, as seen in Chapter 2, Montero rejects the notion that gender difference can be ascribed to writing, and she actively supports the need to ascribe *universal* importance to the experience of literary protagonists regardless of their gender. Although she may reject the notion of 'women's writing', her opinions regarding the problems faced by women in the literary market closely coincide with those of Freixas (2000), who is an avid defender of 'women's writing'. In the opinion of both Montero and Freixas, the two most challenging problems women writers face are a persistent tendency to segregate writing by women from that of men and an equally persistent tendency to include negative allusions to the sex and gender in what purports to be literary criticism of their work.

Montero concurs with those writers who regard women as trapped in a 'double bind' (see Freixas 2000; Etxebarria 2000b; Sanz in Henseler 2003b) and who perceive the real problem as how to change the preferences and perceptions of 'lo que nos rodea' [what is around us]; in other words, how to change the gender prejudices of both female and male readers and writers. Although she may, with good reason reject the label 'women's writing', it is Montero's contention that as long as male readers continue to identify male issues as universal and women's as something 'other', women writers will have difficulty attaining parity of prestige:

And it's high time for male readers to identify with female protagonists, in the same way that we have for centuries identified with male protagonists, which used to be our only literary models. Indeed, that permeability, that flexibility of gaze, will turn us all into wiser, freer beings. (2003: 170)

This statement clarifies that, for Montero, the difference between 'literature' and 'women's writing' (and the source of her ambivalence) is not related to the sex or gender of the author. Instead, it is linked to factors such as the adoption of: a hegemonic or marginal position; a traditional or innovative point of view; domestic or public themes; an identification with, or subversion of, cultural roles and models. She appears to assume the

position noted by Jonathan Culler that, regardless of sex, the way in which the reader, reviewer, or critic approaches a text will determine whether the contents assimilated appear more masculine or feminine (1982: 43–60). As Patrizia Violi also indicates, ‘sexual difference constitutes a pivotal dimension of our experience and our lives, and there is not a single activity which is not – in some way or another – marked, signaled or affected by that difference’ (1991: 11). Both of these writers underline that fact that although gender may be understood as a textual preference, it is, in fact, constitutive of the relationship that all readers engage in with the male or female hegemonic cultural model (Arriaga Flórez et al. 2003: 4). In other words, while Montero has repeatedly asserted that, when it comes to literature, gender is only one of a series of influences acting upon the writer, she simultaneously acknowledges, in her own literary criticism, that it is an important one, deserving of more considered appreciation, if we are to assess with any accuracy the contribution a ‘female’ perspective has made to the arena of (so-called ‘universal’) literature, by re-addressing female literary stereotypes and by introducing hitherto marginalized experiences of life.

Etxebarria on ‘Women’s Writing’

Because this is precisely what Lucía Etxebarria is (like Grandes, Montero, Espido and many others): the clever and a little trampy girl in Catholic school, who writes novels and is on the telly, who is read in ecstasy by her schoolmates and former teachers; coming from a good family, well-educated, who, no matter how much doggy-style fornication she practices in her novels, how fascinated she is about ample bottoms, or how many swearwords she says without crossing herself afterwards, she will always be a prudish schoolgirl who just returned from a spiritual retreat. (Menéndez 2005: 182)

The link made, in this facetious review of *De todo lo visible y lo invisible*, between Montero and Etxebarria, helps to explain Montero’s resistance to the idea that writing by women should be considered collectively and/or separately from writing by men. Etxebarria, on the other hand is more likely to take this kind of indiscriminate prejudice as a reason to celebrate

women's writing. In her opinion, it is only by championing gender difference that this kind of chauvinism will gradually die out.

Etxebarria openly describes herself as a feminist. She has used the term in numerous interviews (for example Pita 2001; and *El Mundo* 2004b), and one of her expressed aims is to 'establish bridges between the academic world and popular culture; to create political and feminist consciousness and to promote activism through humour' (*El Mundo* 2004b). Feminism is a central topic in her non-fiction publications: *La Eva futura/La letra futura* [The Future Eve/Writing's Future] (2000), *En brazos de la mujer fétiche* [In the Arms of Lady Fetish] (2007), *Ya no sufro por amor* [I Don't Suffer For Love] (2005), and *El club de las malas madres* [The Bad Mothers' Club] (2009). Although the Spanish Constitution has stated its commitment to the expansion of women's rights and its support for full equality between the sexes, Etxebarria feels the passive roles – which she sees as socially rather than biologically determined – traditionally ascribed to women still block attempts to achieve full equality. In the prologue to her novel *Nosotras que no somos como las demás* (1999), she states:

We have not come to proclaim the battle of the sexes, but to open a debate about the need to rethink the validity of some obsolete roles about what our society considers to be masculine and feminine. Far from being a product of a natural trend, these roles are social constructions destined to strengthen the artificial separation between men and women, a distance created to maintain an unbalanced and unfair power structure that ultimately hurts both sexes. (1999: 10)

Etxebarria regards this tendency to mistake socially constructed roles for biologically determined ones as the key to the reception of writing by women. For Etxebarria, feminist discourse in the social arena must extend to the vindication of 'women's writing' in the literary arena. Therefore, her urge to redefine women's role in society is linked to her urge to redress the negative treatment of their writing by a male-dominated cultural establishment and literary industry, and she regards championing 'women's writing' as the only way to achieve this. Etxebarria maintains that women's lives are influenced by a series of socially condoned roles that mean that their experience of life will differ from that of their male contemporaries. Since men and women live and experience differently, their ways of writing will

also be different. Therefore, their writing is a prime site for redefining the social roles and ideological structures that keep these in place. As we shall see, the concept of identification, both biologically and socially imposed, is pivotal to Etxebarria's understanding of literature. According to Etxebarria, the need for recognition is the driving force behind the reader's enjoyment of fiction, and she believes that all readers 'approach books, films, poems or songs hoping to see our specific experiences reflected in them, and to find models from which to affirm our identity' (Etxebarria 2000b: 107).

Such an assumption brings certain challenges to mind, especially when one considers whether 'women's literature' may be different from 'men's literature'. Does Etxebarria mean that literature needs to provide realistic models for women? Should fiction by women always be ideological? What kind of role models has she herself provided? Would she reject a female point of view that reaffirms the status quo, championing only writing by women that appears to challenge that status quo? This section will seek answers to these questions by examining interviews with the author, academic essays on her work, and *La letra futura*, where she deals specifically with questions of literature, art, creation, and with the question of the existence of 'women's literature'. The section will be divided into three parts, each corresponding to one of the topics raised above. The first will introduce Etxebarria's approach to literature and consider the role of identification both for writer and reader. The second will focus on 'Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura de mujeres', the essay in which Etxebarria explains her reasons for championing the 'women's writing' label and the new themes and characters which appeared in her own fiction. The third will examine ideology, memory, and political commitment in Etxebarria's views on women's literature with an emphasis on the mother, tracing a distinction between feminist fiction and female fiction. Since Etxebarria is the only one of the writers I examine in this book who openly champions the concept of 'women's writing', and because she argues that one of its achievements is the exploration of a number of themes not explored in sufficient depth by canonical literature, as well as the creation of female characters who are protagonists, this section will also examine Etxebarria's protagonists in order to determine whether Etxebarria succeeds in making her own contribution to the reversal she attributes to 'women's writing'.

Fiction as mirror and vehicle for identification

Etxebarria's persona as a celebrity author, as we saw in Chapter 3, is a rather explosive cocktail constructed from her own controversial declarations, accusations of plagiarism, literary prizes, salacious gossip about her private life, striking outfits, and even nude pictures (Henseler 2006). It ought to be noted, however, that notwithstanding these inflammatory ingredients, the writer's feminist commitment has not wavered. In his article 'Compromiso feminista en la obra de Lucía Etxebarria' [Feminist Commitment in the Work of Lucía Etxebarria], Juan Senís Fernández argues that, behind the polemics surrounding Etxebarria's public persona, there lies a well-organized and solid platform, 'composed of editorial support, writing in various media, and awards' (Senís Fernández 2001), from which to deliver her own message. Senís Fernández's article analyses the way that Etxebarria's feminist ideas are inserted in her fiction, and essays.⁵ He divides Etxebarria's feminist ideas into two main areas. The first concerns itself with questions of identity, roles, and sexual differences, while the second tackles the question of social, economic, and professional inequality.

As we have seen with Montero, feminist writers do not always approve of 'women's literature'. Etxebarria, however, approaches this in *La letra futura* in an overtly accessible way. In this text, she provides a personal account of how writing has had a positive effect on her own complex mental and psychological history, and suggests that, as in her own case,⁶ many authors write in order to 'try to explain what is happening, to try to bring order to the mess inside ourselves, since it seems that if we can capture the scattered feelings on paper, then it will be easier to organize them'

5 Given that Senís' study dates from 2001, it only considers the essays *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, and the prologue to *Nosotras que no somos como las demás*.

6 When asked the same question, twentieth-century English novelist, playwright and journalist Graham Greene gave an answer that seems very in tune with Etxebarria's concept of writing as therapy: 'Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those, who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear, which is inherent in a human condition'.

(Etxebarria 2000: 21–2). According to this understanding of writing as therapy, the process is not complete without an interlocutor: the writer ‘writes for someone who does not exist except in their imagination, but the fact is that they are writing for someone’ (Etxebarria 2000: 21–2). Her strong desire to communicate with the reader outweighs the often exasperating imperative to put up with the demands of the publishing world. The following extract from *La letra futura* serves as an ironic reply to accusations that she, along with other writers, has sold out to the literary market (Henseler 2001):

When a person agrees to publish their writing it is because they intend to communicate, and therefore want to sell. [...] For this reason, any author, like it or not must acquiesce to the promotional demands and sign books even when they do not feel like it, respond politely to interview questions (which most of the time are both misleading and repeated ad infinitum by numerous and varied reporters), patiently pose for photo sessions and attend television programmes in which they, inevitably will make a fool of themselves. (Etxebarria 2000: 146–7)

This comment refers us back to the necessary platform mentioned earlier, and in her interview with the multilingual European current affairs magazine *Café Babel*, she confesses that her dream ‘is to end up being famous enough not to have to promote herself’ (*Café Babel* 2008).

But what exactly is Etxebarria’s aim? ‘Every day I am more convinced that when I write I am seeking identification, not acolytes’ (Etxebarria 2000: 152–3). Etxebarria sees identification as a two-way process of recognition that allows readers to find their own experience reflected in fiction, and that allows the author’s relevance to be identified by the reading public: it works, therefore as a form of reciprocal support. For Etxebarria, therefore, the reader is more important than the literary critic:

The response from readers interests me much more than literary criticism, because knowing that I am read showed me, after years of feeling *weird*, different, difficult and isolated, that there were more people like me. [...] And also, the support has been reciprocal, because, as I can gather from the letters that come to me, reading my books has provided many readers with the same feeling of *recognition*. (2000: 30–1, my emphasis)

A good example of this *reconocimiento* [identification] is the high volume of letters that the writer received following the publication of her novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* [Beatriz and the Celestial Bodies] (Etxebarria 2000: 38). The 'dozens, hundreds of letters' were mostly written by 'not necessarily homosexual' women readers, who admitted having undergone a similar experience to the non-consummated love between the two main characters, Beatriz and Mónica. She appreciates that what prompted these readers to identify with those experiences was precisely the fact that they had not previously found anything similar reflected in mainstream Spanish-language fiction:

I must thank the many women writers whom I know only through their books for allowing me [...] to feel dissatisfied with a role that had been assigned and [...] tell me that the world had more people like me, and had always had. (2000: 113)

Etxebarria asserts that 'creation is inherent to that which the male or female writer lives' (2000: 108), and this seems to tie in with the fact that she is widely considered a member of the so called 'Generation X'. As previously observed, this group is 'characterized by its age, its mostly young and educated reading audience, its textual appropriation of the mass media and popular culture, and its raw expression of contemporary life' (Henseler 2004: 692). The fact that 'Generation X' writers have grown up in a similar historical, political, and social context makes it natural for them, according to Etxebarria, to present a series of common themes in their works:

The vast majority of us include drugs and night scenes [...] Almost all of us place our novels in the urban environment [...] we include explicit sex in our works because we are the first generation that has grown up under the hangover of the great sexual revolution of the 1960s. (Etxebarria 2000: 87–8)

It is not surprising that this mostly young and educated readership feels attracted to the themes and scenarios described above, but what is perhaps striking is that, judging by the letters received by Etxebarria, what her readers find appealing in her novels differs according to whether they are male or female:

Women were grateful; men were in love, or just horny. Each of them had been attracted to a different aspect of the same work. Women were moved by my narration of childhood, men were aroused by my torrid passages. To my surprise, I have been defined by several magazines as an erotic writer. (Etxebarria 2000: 114)

Even if we overlook the label of ‘erotic writer’ that Etxebarria calls unfounded (*Qué Leer* 2010), and that appears to stem from some of her male readers, this difference in the response of her readers would appear to illustrate Etxebarria’s point that: ‘Men and women live experiences which are in part identical and in part different, and our vision of the world, unfortunately, is conditioned to be different depending on our gender’ (2000: 107). This, as Etxebarria sees it, would not only apply to reader-response, but to the way that an author’s writing is conditioned by sex and gender. Although she notes that gendered roles are socially constructed, she also acknowledges that the sex of the author creates different expectations in readers and, therefore, ‘women’s writing’ will depend to a large extent on its appeal to women readers. As the literary canon has traditionally been written by male authors, Etxebarria feels that for centuries, women readers lacked the opportunity to find their experiences portrayed in fiction: ‘Until very recently, the experience of woman, of woman as a pariah in a patriarchal system, was kept invisible in the art world’ (2000: 110). For her, this means that, as men and women experience life – and the great themes of literature, such as death, war, love, and pain – in a different way, it is not only fair but necessary to champion ‘women’s writing’:

Women in general, and women writers in particular have learned to see the world from the imaginary in which we have grown, an imaginary that no longer serves us. Women’s literature generally amalgamates the same point of view expressed from different voices emanating from the perspective of our own women’s nature. (Etxebarria 2000: 108)

As we have seen, Etxebarria believes that the reception of literature depends to a large extent on reader identification. In this sense, the ‘propia naturaleza de mujeres’ would refer to the fact that the socially constructed gender roles mean women are more likely than men to write about experiences and issues that relate to women’s experiences of a certain society. Hence, her championing of ‘women’s writing’ is linked to this appreciation that

literature as a two-way process of identification between the reader and the writer and that the male reader has, historically, been more likely to identify canonical works as those written by men. For this reason, Etxebarria considers it necessary for women to 'live and write as women. Now it is our turn to find a voice of our own, a way of being in the world' (2000: 110), because until 'women did not start to talk for themselves, nobody knew what women really felt' (ibid.).

The question then arises as to what Etxebarria means when she asserts that 'Women's literary tradition needs to correspond to a literary and political subversiveness' (ibid.), and the way her own fiction has attempted to achieve this subversion. We shall examine Etxebarria's explanation, in *La letra futura*, of the way 'women's writing' has reversed the three basic female prototypes in 'male literature', as well as the new motifs and themes it has provided, and then, focusing on Etxebarria's own fictional characters, we shall explore what and how her own fiction has contributed to this reversal.

Literary subversion in Etxebarria

In 'Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura de mujeres', Etxebarria notes that the fate of canonical female fictional characters like Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Ana Ozores reinforces the notion that the woman who does not subjugate her sexuality to patriarchal imperatives will suffer a tragic fate. According to Etxebarria – and many female critics – the female characters in canonical works tend to be characterized by two main features: they are first and foremost literary objects, not subjects, and secondly, they are radically divided as muses, loving mothers, and beloved partners or bitches, adulteresses, and madwomen. Outside Spain, this approach is familiar from the work of writers like Gilbert and Gubar (1979), Showalter (1979), Millet (1970), and many others, but the fact that her views are still considered so provocative in Spain, reminds us that the resistance of writers of Montero's generation to 'women only' debates, as Montero herself links back to the negative effect of the *Sección Femenina*, has delayed this debate in Spain and specifically, in Spanish higher education. Etxebarria believes that one of the main achievements

of 'women's writing' has been that of giving voice to female characters by turning them into literary subjects, and not objects. In this sense, her views correspond with what has been called Second Wave feminism. 'Women's writing' turns female literary characters into literary subjects, creating new female prototypes that blur the traditional 'good' versus 'evil' divide, and developing literary themes that had not hitherto been explored in any depth, or with any subtlety.

As examples of these themes, Etxebarria cites the mother–daughter relationship, female friendship and rivalry, and the relationship between sisters. These are issues that can be raised by male authors, such as Haruki Murakami, who provides a particularly impressive representation of the love-rivalry relationship between two sisters in his 2008 novel *After Dark*, and Etxebarria in no way suggests that these issues cannot be written by men: 'This does not mean that a male writer cannot, of course, create great female characters and vice versa, but we cannot forget that writing from a place of experience is very different to writing from a place of documentation or fantasy' (2000: 109). However, she rightly notes that none of these themes (so universal to women) are considered universal to the literary canon (2000: 112).⁷

One could infer that, for Etxebarria, what matters is that the experience of the writer matches the experience of the literary character. This is controversial, not to say limiting, for women writers, and it is a debate that has often become heated when the need for positive role models and writing by women come into play. The American author Tova Mirvis, a formerly observant Orthodox Jewish woman, responds to Wendy Shalit's accusations that she has portrayed 'deeply observant Jews in an unflattering or ridiculous light' (Shalit 2005), because she has renounced Orthodox Judaism, saying:

Since when must a fiction writer actually have lived the life he or she writes about? Since when must one be a murderer to write *Crime and Punishment*, a pedophile to write *Lolita*, a hermaphrodite to write *Middlesex*, a boy on a boat with a tiger to write *Life of Pi*? Yes, it seems, Shalit has outed the whole tawdry lot of us. She's revealed to the public the terrible truth: Fiction writers make up things. (Mirvis 2005)

7 For more information on literary themes, see Jennifer McClinton-Temple (2010).

I include this comment here to remind us that it is dangerous to assume, when the sex of the author is female, that the most vivid fictional accounts are those narrated from experience. In *La letra futura*, Etxebarria describes her writing process as a kind of trance that allows her to embody her fictional characters, allowing her to 'become' numerous different female, and on occasion male, characters, who could therefore be interpreted as projections of herself:

Even if my intention was, in principle, to assume the role of a simple narrator [...] I could not help but get into his [Eduardo's] skin. [...] It was not just the fact that I was describing making love to a woman as a woman, but that I did come to feel like a man. [...] I put myself in the place of the other. It was a surprising and unexpected discovery, and I prefer not to analyse this projection or author/character transposition from a psychological perspective, because I would like to keep the magical component of the experience. (2000: 25–6)

Jaime and Eduardo are secondary characters in *Nosotras que no somos como las demás*. Jaime is a married man who falls in love with Raquel and decides to put an end to their affair for fear of the inconvenience it will cause him to divorce his apparently beloved and well-off wife, Gemma. Eduardo, on the other hand, is a young and naive lifeguard, who works in Gemma's swimming pool, and with whom she has an affair. Etxebarria believes, as does Adrienne Rich, that women writers have the richness of 'a whole psychic geography to be explored' (Rich in Sellery 1986: 188) and that this, as for male writers, includes writing and imagining male characters.

In his 2001 study covering *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*, and *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, Juan Senís Fernández remarks that, at that time, there was a preponderance of female characters in Etxebarria's novels. There is no doubt that this variety of relationships between the different women characters has allowed Etxebarria to explore some of the themes and women characters which, according to her, constitute the main contributions made by 'women's literature', but this is not the only resource she has. Her more recent novels, *Cosmofobia*, *Lo verdadero es un momento de lo falso* [Truth is Naught but a Moment of Falsehood], and *El contenido del silencio* [The Contents of Silence] introduce a number of important male characters, depict relationships between men and women, and between men and

men. Her work deals with the themes of female friendship, the relationship between sisters, the difficulty of balancing work and family life, the relationship between mother and daughter, and the difficulty of escaping traditional roles, and, something that seems especially welcomed by female readers, is that the women are not idealized and these themes are not treated overly simplistically.

Turning to some specific examples from Etxebarria's fiction, the three sisters in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* finally realize that, despite the different directions they have taken in life, their respective and unsuccessful pursuit of happiness makes them more similar than they had originally thought. Thus, Cristina's initial disdain for her sisters and their life choices gradually turns into a sense of sisterhood and solidarity. Beatriz, the protagonist of *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, only finds solidarity, temporarily, with her friend Mónica. Their friendship soon leads to much more intense feelings, at least on the part of Beatriz, who finds it impossible to move on after the extremely close and burning, although non-consummated, relationship she had with Mónica. Likewise, *Nosotras que no somos como las demás* features four women characters who, each in her own way, refuse to conform to traditional stereotypes. Raquel, for example, is a character constructed with great psychological depth, whose stunning physical appearance and successful job as a model is combined with a sharp and practical intelligence. Throughout the novel, Raquel's suffering and dismay after realizing that the man she is in love with will never leave his convenient marriage for her shows the futility and injustice of labelling women on the basis of their sexual activity.

Ruth Swanson, the protagonist of *De todo lo visible y lo invisible* is an extremely paradoxical character. Although her films are popular and widely acclaimed by the public, she is constantly harassed by the critics. She appears, in public, to be a witty, even arrogant woman, but she is also depicted as tremendously insecure. While she sees herself as an independent and sexually liberated woman, she looks forward to her partner, Juan, leaving his girlfriend and committing to her. She is distanced from her family, though her deceased mother's phantom keeps haunting her. The variety of themes raised in *Una historia de amor como otra cualquiera* [A Love Story Like All the Rest] includes, among others, mental illness, refugee camps, family blackmail, incest, and the incapacity to confront one's sexual

preferences. Against this background, this collection of short stories portrays many female characters torn between their traditional upbringing and the desire to rebel against social constraints. One of the stories relates the desperation and agony of a traditional mother who must choose between breaking up her marriage and supporting her now devastated daughter, or ignoring the suspicions she harbours against her supposedly abusive husband; another story narrates the predicament of a Saharan woman, who feels the need to leave the man she loves behind in order to repay the debt of gratitude to her homeland.

Etxebarria's subsequent novel *Un milagro en equilibrio* [A Miracle In Equilibrium] is written as a letter/diary-type book, in which complicated, insecure Eva resolves to tell her newborn baby Amanda about her life, her difficulties as a first-time mother, and about the pain of losing her own mother, whom she feels she never got to know properly. *Cosmofobia*, set in the bohemian cultural melting-pot of Lavapiés presents a wide range of characters, both male and female, each of them with their own background. The intricate web of relationships in the novel makes it possible for Etxebarria to introduce us to a series of non-conforming women characters such as Susana, a young Spanish woman who in twenty-first-century-Spain is still discriminated against for being black, or Sonia La Chunga, the epitome of the under-qualified, underpaid young woman of Spain's postmodern society. Additional, atypical female characters are likewise depicted in *Lo verdadero es un momento de lo falso*. Olga, who holds an extremely successful post in the music industry after choosing her career over her family life, ends up having an affair with the much younger Romano. Beautiful Valeria, on the other hand, sees how her intellectual aspirations fade after succumbing to the societal pressure to rely on her stunning physical appearance. Finally, in *El contenido del silencio*, Etxebarria's most recent novel, Heidi, an extremely bewitching middle-aged woman and the leader of a cult, lures beautiful but troubled Cordelia. Upon learning of the cult's collective suicide in which Cordelia is believed to have perished, her brother Gabriel sets out to find the truth, accompanied by Cordelia's adventurous flatmate and best friend Helena. Through their search for Cordelia, Gabriel will embark on a soul-searching journey as part of which he will have to escape the charming but toxic embrace of his manipulative fiancée Patricia.

As Senís Fernández asserts, all throughout Etxebarria's fictional work:

It appears that there are women in crisis for several reasons: an excessive inhibitory load of role models that do not give women the freedom they want, that seem to make them choose between professional development and a family, that condemn them be pariahs (such as Beatriz) if they fail to adopt the existing gender role (whether homosexual or heterosexual). These women are victims of their upbringing, but even when they take advantage of the roles they themselves have established, they are unable to attain happiness. (2001)

Thus, by exploring a number of themes that had not been explored in sufficient depth by canonical literature, and by creating a number of women characters that are not literary subjects, but objects, and that represent a multiplicity of paradoxes instead of a good or bad totality, Etxebarria succeeds in making her own contribution to the reversal achieved by 'women's writing'.

But are these themes and characters really new? Etxebarria's aim is to create a new 'type of woman: neither beautiful nor rich nor elegant, but neither an amazon nor a prostitute not a harpy' (Etxebarria 2000: 112). Interviewed for the online newspaper *Público* she went as far as to affirm that the model for Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander had already appeared in *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*. Given that she attributes this to the very small number of features they share (both have shaved heads and are bisexual), Etxebarria risks making herself look foolish and providing ammunition to those who might argue, based on the success of the *Millennium*⁸ series, that anything a female author can do a male author can do better:

I had already created Lisbeth a long time ago. Beatriz was not a hacker, but she was bisexual and had her head shaved. He [Larsson] has taken a kind of woman who actually exists and if I did it before he did, it was because I was out there and he

8 The *Millennium* trilogy is composed of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2006), and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest* (2007). By March 2010, Larsson's *Millennium* series had sold 27 million copies in more than forty countries. He was the second best-selling author in the world in 2008, behind Khaled Hosseini, and film versions of the *Millennium* series were produced and released in Scandinavia in 2009.

was not. This is a type of woman who is present in the world of fashion and music. And I am sure that there are plenty of such heroines in the literary world as well. The system always engulfs what begins as anti-system. What has happened is that this man has taken this woman – now that everyone is willing to accept her – and turned her into a best seller. Eleven years ago, Beatriz was still disturbing. (*Público.es* 2010a)

Putting to one side the slightly offensive suggestion that Larsson – a journalist, photographer, writer, and political activist – was not ‘out there’, there is some truth to the notion that new role models take time to reach the height of their popularity. However, there is less truth to the suggestions that Beatriz was among the avant garde. A strong tradition of alternative, bisexual, and lesbian heroines has existed in English-language fiction since the 1980s, although it may well be that Etxebarria is unaware of this, as these novels tended to be fostered by small publishers such as the Women’s Press. The fact that *Beatriz* was awarded the Nadal Prize in 1998 indicates how far Spanish literature had evolved since the Transition, but it also suggests that Etxebarria has herself benefited from that first, very definitely marginalized and ‘antisistema’ wave of alternative writing by women (Maurell 1998). In Spain, the precedent of a novel in which the female protagonist questions ‘the patriarchal pattern of an exemplary female way of being exemplary’ winning the Nadal Prize was set in 1945 by Carmen Laforet’s novel, *Nada* (Almeida 2003). And, of course, female rebellion is represented in what Carmen Martín Gaité refers to as ‘*la chica rara*’ [the strange girl] in her essay with the same title in *Desde la ventana* (1988). In this essay, Martín Gaité focuses on Andrea, the protagonist of *Nada*, and lists the ways in which this character breaks with the traditional protagonists of romantic novels. Focusing on the *chica rara*’s questioning of the behaviours that were expected from women at the time, Martín Gaité concludes that following the publication of *Nada*, the prototype of this subversive female character can be found in numerous novels by women writers. More than a decade later, Lélia Almeida also notes that the most recurrent aspects of contemporary ‘women’s writing’ are the questioning of female behaviour and attitudes to patriarchal mandates (2003). Hence, where many critics have found Etxebarria’s contribution to the array of women’s prototypes praiseworthy (Urioste 2000; Redondo Goicoechea 2003), it is important to observe that her contribution is not necessarily especially new, nor is it

radical. Etxebarria's ignorance of the history that precedes her is due to the fact that writing that is not assimilated by the canon, tends to be forgotten and must be rediscovered by each generation. Despite the work of feminist critics, there is still a lack of coherence to the 'history' of 'women's writing', particularly in Spain, where the work of critics like Freixas is helping to bring it to public attention, but where, as we have seen in the case of Montero, women of the Franco era and Transition have been wary of marginalizing themselves by focusing on this issue. Etxebarria's assumption that she is a trail-blazer in the representation of shaven-headed, lesbian protagonists is, in itself, an indication of a central problem with 'women's writing'.

From Segregation to Completion

In this chapter we have seen that the different responses of Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria to the question of the existence of 'women's writing' are inseparable from a critical tendency to describe writing by women as over-emotional, lacking action, dealing only with female characters, and appealing overwhelmingly to women readers. Although this interpretation of the label has been contested by supporters and non-supporters alike, and despite the changing critical response to the work of women writers, they are asked – time and again – for their views on the existence, or not, of a specifically 'female' literature. It seems that the concept of universality is pivotal to the way Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria feel about that label.

All coincide in their denouncement of an ongoing tendency to make negative allusions to the sex and gender of women authors in literary criticism; however their views differ when it comes to certain aspects of the debate, such as the persistent tendency to segregate writing by women from that of men. For Matute, the difference between a female writer and 'woman's writing' lies with the fact that she associates aesthetic concerns with the first and the transmission of ideological messages with the second. Furthermore, attention has been drawn to this apparent lack of 'sisterhood' on Matute's part, in a way that would have been exceptional in the

case of a male author. From this, we can assume that, even today, the issue of 'women's writing' is still haunted by biological and social, rather than purely literary, concerns. The existence of such extra-literary assumptions recurs in the contradictions in Montero's resistance to the 'women's writing' label, despite the fact that her views conform to those of its advocates. Like Matute, Montero feels that literature should not be used as a political weapon, and she feels that the label 'women's writing' should be avoided as it connotes 'women's issues', women protagonists, and female readership. The concept of universality is also key to Montero's rejection of the label, as canonical literature by male authors has never been described as 'masculinist'. Etxebarria denounces the mistaken prejudice that writing to which the label 'women's writing' is attached is inherently political and/or separatist. According to Etxebarria, the tendency to mistake socially constructed roles for biologically determined roles has also traditionally affected women writers, who for centuries have seen how their works were treated as if they belonged to a kind of sub-genre. She believes that literature is a two-way process of identification between the reader and the writer, and she is a strong supporter of the 'women's writing' label.

In spite of their different responses, Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria agree on the need to ascribe universal importance and all, still, in the early years of the twenty-first century, denounce the treatment of writing by women by the critical establishment. Women writers are clearly still stuck in what Henseler refers to as a 'double bind', and the usefulness, or not, of a label to distinguish 'women's writing' is clearly tied in with the existing gender-prejudices of both female and male readers and writers. What these three writers agree on is that as long as critics and reviewers insist on identifying and labelling male issues as universal and women's as something 'other', women writers will have difficulty attaining parity in questions of prestige.

