MISCELÁNEA

a journal of english
and american studies

miscelánea

vol. 73

2026

literature, film and
cultural studies
language
and linguistics

mm

revista de estudios ingleses
y norteamericanos

miscelánea

vol. 73
Junio 2026

Literatura, cine
y estudios culturales
Lengua y lingüística

FECYT-279/2025
Fecha de certificación: 14 de julio de 2016 (5ª edición)
Válido hasta: 19 de diciembre de 2027
(renovado en la convocatoria de 2025 - 13/11/2025)

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies se publica con la ayuda económica del Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras y del Vicerrectorado de Política Científica de la Universidad de Zaragoza.

Publicación semestral (2 vols. al año) del Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana de la Universidad de Zaragoza./ Published twice a year by the Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza, Spain.

Las suscripciones deberán dirigirse a/
Please address subscriptions to:

Revista *Miscelánea*
Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza
Edificio de Ciencias Geológicas
C/ Pedro Cerbuna, 12. 50009 Zaragoza
puz@unizar.es http://puz.unizar.es

Precio de la suscripción (anual)/
Subscription price (2 volumes):
15 euros
(IVA incluido/ VAT included)

Edición y ©:
Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
de la Universidad de Zaragoza

Selección de textos:
Consejo de redacción de *Miscelánea*

Vol. 73 - Junio 2026

Dirección, coordinación, tratamiento de textos y edición electrónica:
Beatriz Oria Gómez (Literatura, cine y estudios culturales)
Miguel Ángel Benítez Castro (Lengua y lingüística)
María Ferrández San Miguel (Reseñas)

Editor de producción:
Rubén Peinado

Revisor de estilo:
Oliver Shaw

Auxiliares de redacción:
María Abizanda Cardona
Claudia Aguas Albero
Alba Ansó Millán
Marta Bagüés Bautista
Amanda Cámara Gamazo
Laura García Soria
Yolanda Hernáiz Martínez
Natalia Jiménez Pérez
Aitana Monzón Blasco
Carmen Navarro Mateo
Irache Osés San Martín
Clara Revilla Lahoz
Belén Salinas Torres
Ana Eugenia Sancho Ortiz
Victoria Pilar Santamaría Ibor

Diseño gráfico:
Isidro Ferrer

Maquetación:
Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza

Imprime:
Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Zaragoza.

ISSN: 1137-6368
e-ISSN: 2386-4834
Depósito legal: Z-2811-2004

a journal of english
and american studies

miscelánea

Prensas de la Universidad
de Zaragoza

2026

Departamento
de Filología Inglesa
y Alemana

Edición electrónica/
Internet homepage:

<https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/misc>

Cuenta de Twitter:
@MiscelaneaUZ

Cuenta de Bluesky:
@Miscelaneauz.bsky.social

miscelánea

Redacción, correspondencia e intercambios:
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad de Zaragoza
50009 Zaragoza · Spain
Tel. 976 762413 – 976 761525
E-mail:
miscelanea@unizar.es

Edición en Red/Online Edition:
<https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/misc>

Christian Gutleben
University of Nice, Francia

Felicity Hand
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3766-6266>

Luc Herman
University of Antwerp, Bélgica
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6013-2900>

María Isabel Herrando Rodrigo
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3895-5534>

María Dolores Herrero Granado
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1363-0189>

Tamar Jeffers-McDonald
University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, Reino Unido
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4905-2525>

Deborah Jermyn
University of Roehampton, London, Reino Unido
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9261-9887>

Jane Jordan
Kingston University, London, Reino Unido
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2129-6504>

Enrique Lafuente Millán
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4783-3953>

Rosa Lorés Sanz
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5574-6182>

Hilaria Loyo Gómez
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4933-2199>

Zenón Luis Martínez
Universidad de Huelva, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5228-7822>

María José Luzón Marco
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0454-5457>

Ana Manzanas Calvo
Universidad de Salamanca, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9830-638X>

Belén Martín Lucas
Universidad de Vigo, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5660-1559>

Paula Martín Salván
Universidad de Córdoba, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8514-2670>

María Jesús Martínez Alfaro
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7335-7690>

Silvia Martínez Falquina
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8054-095X>

Sergio Maruenda Bataller
Universitat de València, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3041-0110>

Paul McDonald
University of Nottingham, Reino Unido

Arsenio Jesús Moya Guijarro
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha,
España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6591-6680>

Laura Muresan
The Bucharest University of Economic
Studies, Bucharest, Rumanía
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5585-2863>

Silvia Murillo Ornat
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1369-3590>

Marita Nadal Blasco
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2902-7613>

Claus-Peter Neumann
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6950-9153>

Ana Luiza Pires de Freitas
Federal University of Health Sciences
of Porto Alegre, Brazil
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8285-6528>

Elena Oliete Aldea
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8197-1199>

Susana Onega Jaén
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1672-4276>

Beatriz Oria Gómez
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0663-0519>

Nieves Pascual Soler
Universidad Internacional de Valencia,
España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8962-5298>

Viorica Eleonora Patea Birk
Universidad de Salamanca, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3291-5574>

Beatriz Penas Ibáñez
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2418-4695>

Javier Pérez Guerra
Universidad de Vigo, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8882-667X>

Ramón Plo Alastrué
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1151-1661>

Juan Antonio Prieto Pablos
Universidad de Sevilla, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8912-2818>

Paula Rautionaho
University of Eastern Finland, Finlandia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5239-8407>

Constanza del Río Álvaro
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3370-3020>

María Isabel Romero Ruiz
Universidad de Málaga, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8084-4865>

Miguel F. Ruiz Garrido
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9647-1039>

Noelia Ruiz Madrid
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9800-5624>

Manuela Ruiz Pardos
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9115-1020>

Dora Sales Salvador
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6290-2013>

Lena Steveker
University of Luxembourg, Luxemburgo
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6234-6790>

Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez
Universidad de Murcia, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8303-044>

Rubén Valdés Miyares
Universidad de Oviedo, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9564-595X>

Javier Valenzuela
Universidad de Murcia, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0007-7943>

Rafael Vélez Núñez
Universidad de Cádiz, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0405-7357>

José María Yebra Pertusa
Universidad de Zaragoza, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5449-6556>

Francisco Yus Ramos
Universidad de Alicante, España
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5276-3251>

Krystyna Warchał
University of Silesia, Polonia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8422-4911>

table of contents

Articles

Articles

PLAIN LANGUAGE AND MODALITY: ANALYSIS OF A PARALLEL CORPUS WITH *SHALL* AND SIMPLE FUTURE TENSE IN THE ENACTING TERMS OF DELEGATED DIRECTIVES

LENGUAJE CLARO Y MODALIDAD: ANÁLISIS DE UN CORPUS PARALELO CON *SHALL* Y FUTURO SIMPLE EN LA PARTE DISPOSITIVA DE DIRECTIVAS DELEGADAS

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611856

PALOMA BLASCO FERNÁNDEZ
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
pblasco43@alumno.uned.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9520-3705

M.ª ÁNGELES ESCOBAR ÁLVAREZ
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
maescobar@flog.uned.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8650-0038

Abstract

Plain language should be recognised, by both writers and translators, as a key element for the qualities of European legal drafting. This is particularly relevant in the context of drafting European directives, where it is essential to maintain legal certainty, facilitate uniform interpretation across Member States and ensure that amendments are seamlessly integrated into existing legislative frameworks without introducing ambiguities or inconsistencies. This study focuses on a parallel corpus (English/Spanish) of enacting terms used in 20 delegated directives available in the EUR-Lex database. In particular, the study focuses on the use of the English modal verb *shall* and the simple future tense in Spanish. The corpus selection of delegated directives ranges from 2019 to 2024, after the publication of the *Joint Practical Guide of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission for Persons Involved in the Drafting of European Union Legislation* in 2015. The study findings serve to identify common structural patterns and provide insights into the use and translation of modality in line with current European recommendations on plain language.

Keywords: Delegated directives, parallel corpus, modal *shall*, simple future tense, enacting terms, plain language.

Resumen

La redacción jurídica en el marco europeo ha de favorecer que redactores, redactoras, traductores y traductoras reconozcan que el lenguaje claro constituye uno de sus principales pilares. En la redacción de directivas europeas es imprescindible preservar la seguridad jurídica, favorecer una interpretación uniforme entre los Estados miembros y asegurar que las enmiendas se integren correctamente en los marcos legislativos vigentes para evitar ambigüedades o inconsistencias. Este estudio se centra en un corpus paralelo (inglés/español) de la parte dispositiva de 20 directivas delegadas de la base de datos EUR-Lex. En particular, el estudio se centra en el uso del verbo modal *shall* en inglés y del futuro simple en español. El corpus de las directivas delegadas incluye las redactadas entre 2019 y 2024, después de la publicación de la *Guía práctica común del Parlamento Europeo, del Consejo y de la Comisión para la redacción de textos legislativos de la Unión Europea* en 2015. Los resultados de este estudio sirven para identificar patrones recurrentes y arrojar luz sobre el uso y la traducción en español de la modalidad de acuerdo con las recomendaciones actuales de lenguaje claro.

Palabras clave: Directivas delegadas, corpus paralelo, modal *shall,* futuro simple, parte dispositiva, lenguaje claro.

1. Introduction to European Legal Drafting

Legal texts within the European Union can be grouped based on their pragmatic and performative functions (Gibová 2011). These texts fall into two primary categories as illustrated in Table 1:

Constitutive rules	Prescriptive rules
Regulations and decisions (performative language)	Directives (prescriptive language)

Table 1. EU texts and their pragmatic features (Gibová 2011)

Directives constitute a form of secondary legislation intended to harmonise national laws across European Union (EU) Member States in pursuit of common objectives. Although not binding in all their details, directives cannot be disregarded by Member States. As the principal instrument for legislative harmonisation, they establish a framework that must be transposed into national legal systems, as explained in Andone and Coman-Kund (2017: 80):

> In principle, EU Directives are not directly applicable but need to be enshrined into national law. In order to achieve the EU's objectives, these legislative acts require timely and proper transposition and implementation. This means that these acts need to be incorporated into national law in order to make the EU's objectives and requirements directly applicable in the Member States, and they need to be applied at the national [sic] and subnational level. Put simply, these legislative acts need to be complied with by the Member States (cf. Falkner et al. 2005: 12-13).

Typically, the main forms of secondary EU legislation (directives, regulations and decisions) frequently employ nuanced obligation markers to convey varying degrees of obligation and other modal meanings. Hence, these texts may be a rich source of modality in legal drafting for analysis. In particular, the present study focuses on delegated directives, a subgenre regulated by Article 290 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU):

> Article 290 TFEU defines delegated acts as those that: (1) are adopted by the European Commission; (2) are of general application; (3) "supplement or amend certain non-essential elements" of the basic act; (4) are based on an explicit delegation of power (contained in a legislative act) that lays down the objectives, content, and scope of the delegated act, and is of specific duration; and (5) may not be concerned with "essential elements of an area" regulated by the basic act. (Del Monte and Manko 2021: 4)

European legislation seeks to persuade Member States to comply with specific provisions (Andone and Coman-Kund 2017). This performative dimension aligns directives with the framework of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Modality is closely associated with speech acts, with modal verbs serving as a clear expression of the legislator's attitude toward the action of the verb. In fact, modal verbs in legal drafting have been widely studied due to their role in encoding obligations, permissions and recommendations (Cooper 2011; Garzone 2013; Andone and Coman-Kund 2017). Previous research has highlighted that while some modal verbs such as *must* are generally unambiguous in legal contexts, others, particularly *shall*, have been criticised for their inconsistent use and ambiguity (Cooper 2011; Guarino 2023).

Furthermore, speech acts in legislative texts such as European directives can be classified according to their structure as either direct or indirect speech acts (Searle 1969). Direct speech acts occur when the grammatical structure of an utterance directly corresponds to its illocutionary force. For example, a directive illustrates a direct speech act, as in "Member States shall ensure the compliance of (...)" (Directive 2003/87/EC), where *shall* directly expresses an obligation.

In contrast, indirect speech acts, as described by Searle (1975), involve performing an illocutionary act indirectly through another act. For instance, in the directive "Member States may, if they deem necessary, adopt additional measures to ensure (...)" (Directive 2014/24/EU), the sentence indirectly encourages Member States to take action by framing the obligation within a conditional structure, rather than issuing a direct command. So far, legal drafting in *Common Law* systems has been characterised by a conservative approach to legislative language (Mellinkoff 1963; Crystal and Davy 1969; Tiersma 1999; Williams 2005, 2011; Mattila 2006). One of its most distinctive features is the persistence of *shall* as a marker of legal obligation. This modal verb has been widely used in legislative texts to impose duties and obligations, ensuring consistency in legal interpretation. However, its use has also been debated, as it can express other meanings across legislative texts (Gibová 2011; Felici 2012; Garner 2013; Garzone 2013; Escobar and Samaniego 2022; Guarino 2023). Cooper (2011) cites Tanner's (2006) analysis of Directive 2002/2/EC, where 22 uses of deontic *shall* are identified together with other 5 non-deontic uses of this modal verb. This double use leads the author to conclude that the difficulty was compounded by the continued use of peculiar linguistic conventions, which included the use of *shall* both as a deontic modal and as an indication of the future (Tanner 2006 in Cooper 2011: 49).

The issue of modal ambiguity is also reflected in the Spanish translations of the modal verb *shall*, which frequently use the simple future tense. While this use aligns with legal drafting conventions, the simple future tense has also been described as polyfunctional and ambiguous, and can express obligation, prediction, warning or promise depending on pragmatic purpose (Real Academia Española (RAE) 2009; Escandell-Vidal 2010, 2018; Lara-Bermejo 2016). These linguistic sources underscore the interpretative flexibility of the future tense, which may pose difficulties in legal translation and transposition, especially in terms of clarity and consistency across multilingual legal systems.

Moreover, Thegel and Lindgren (2020), in a corpus-based study of EU parliamentary interventions, confirm this variability, showing that verbs such as *deber*, *poder*, *haber* and the simple future tense are commonly used to express obligation, necessity and possibility, with interpretations ranging from deontic (imposing obligation or granting permission) to epistemic (expressing probability or inference). These authors claim that this ambiguity has consequences for legal drafting and interpretation, underscoring the importance of precision in the choice of modal verbs. This concern is echoed in recent plain-language initiatives promoted by the RAE and the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española (ASALE), such as the creation of the Red Panhispánica de Lenguaje

Claro y Accesible (2022) and the *Guía panhispánica de lenguaje claro y accesible* (2024), which highlight clarity and precision in legal and administrative texts as institutional priorities across the Spanish-speaking world. Although these initiatives do not address modality specifically, they reflect a growing institutional concern with linguistic ambiguity in legal drafting.

The present study adopts a parallel corpus approach, focusing on delegated directives in English and their Spanish translations. Regarding parallel corpus analysis, we follow Felici (2012) and assume an original text in language A (English) and its translated version in language B (Spanish). Her findings illustrate the value of parallel data for uncovering systematic drafting and translation practices across languages, reinforcing the rationale for the design adopted in our study. By contrasting both languages, our study seeks to highlight not only how obligation and futurity are encoded, but also how translation choices may perpetuate or mitigate ambiguity.

The research focuses on the enacting terms of directives (the binding part), which exhibit a particular distribution of information: "[…] They are composed of articles, which may be grouped into parts, titles, chapters and sections […] and may be accompanied by annexes" (Legal Service (European Commission) 2015: 7.3: 24). In the case of the delegated directives in our corpora, the enacting terms contain four articles: Article 1, Article 2, Article 3 and Article 4, where the modal verb *shall* corresponds to the Spanish simple future tense, after the enacting formula "HAS ADOPTED THIS DIRECTIVE", at the beginning of the preamble. As discussed below, the modal *shall* in enacting terms may result in ambiguity and leave no discretion to Member States in the process of transposition, since directives should not be considered regulations (Legal Service (European Commission) 2015).

The main objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of obligation in EU secondary legislation and identify new avenues for research related to clarity recommendations. Accordingly, the following research questions are addressed:

i) How is legal obligation expressed through modality in the enacting terms of delegated directives in the parallel corpus?

ii) What type of modal ambiguity arises from the use of *shall* in English in contrast to the simple future tense in Spanish?

iii) What clearer alternatives of modality may improve legal drafting in both languages?

2. Clarity and Modality in European Directives

The guide *How to Write Clearly* (2012), by the Directorate-General for Translation (European Commission), makes no mention of the modal *shall*. A later publication, the so-called *Joint Practical Guide of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission for Persons Involved in the Drafting of European Union Legislation* (Legal Service (European Commission) 2015), seems to require that a text have a balance between simplification and precision, and illustrates a potential conflict with the use of the modal *shall* in texts, as follows:

> *Example of a text which did not achieve this balance:*
> "A compulsory [product] labelling system shall be introduced and shall be compulsory in all Member States from 1 January 2000 onwards. However, this compulsory system shall not exclude the possibility for a Member State to decide to apply the system merely on an optional basis in respect of [the product] sold in that same Member State". (Legal Service (European Commission): 1.4: 10-11)

A few experts explicitly advocated replacing *shall* with *must* in legislative drafting, as in Williams (2005) and Garner (2013). The latter author observes that *shall* combines obligation, futurity, impersonal style and, therefore, can be overused in places where its meaning is less clear. According to Escobar and Samaniego (2022), there are two references for the use of *shall* in legal drafting. The first appears in Garner (2013) as a general recommendation, suggesting the deletion of *shall* except in cases of mandatory use. The second reference is found in the *Joint Practical Guide*, indicating the following:

> In the enacting terms of binding acts, other languages, such as French, use the present tense, whilst English generally uses the auxiliary 'shall'. In both languages, the use of the future tense should be avoided wherever possible. (Legal Service (European Commission): 2.3.2: 11)

The European Commission's *English Style Guide* (2024, 10.27-28: 59) provides further insight into the issue. It recommends the use of *shall* to impose an obligation or a requirement through a positive or negative imperative in EU legislation. Therefore, it also stipulates that *shall* should not be employed outside the enacting terms of legislation. To date, no published study has provided a definitive solution to the ambiguity surrounding *shall* in legislative drafting.

Another recent study of EU secondary legislation is Guarino's (2023), which presents a contrastive analysis of the use of *shall* in legislative texts in the European Union and the United Kingdom. Guarino's findings indicate that *shall* remains the most frequently used modal verb in EU legislation, as evidenced by data from the European directives corpus. In contrast, the UK corpus shows a notable decline in the use of *shall*, with many instances replaced by *may*, and an increasing preference for *must*.

Garner (2004) argued that *shall* is ambiguous and inconsistently interpreted in legal texts, recommending its replacement with clearer alternatives such as *must* or *may* to enhance legal precision, clarity and alignment with plain-language drafting principles. In the English corpus, the modal verb *shall* is mostly used to impose legal obligations, particularly in enacting terms. Despite its long-standing role in legal drafting, *shall* has come under increasing scrutiny from both legal scholars and plain-language advocates due to its semantic ambiguity and declining practical utility. While many drafters assume *shall* denotes obligation, research and judicial interpretation have demonstrated that the term can convey a range of meanings, including *must*, *may*, *will* and *is*, depending on the context.

Following Felici's (2012) study, the modal verb *shall* presents ambiguities in legislative texts, particularly within the context of the EU. Its excessive use can be problematic in legal translation and interpretation. While *shall* is typically associated with deontic speech acts such as ordering and prohibiting, there are instances where it serves other functions, including performativity and the establishment of necessary conditions. Furthermore, some EU languages lack a direct equivalent of *shall*, making translation complex and potentially inaccurate, as in the specific case of Spanish, given the parallel nature of our study. Therefore, EU legislative drafters should consider adopting clearer alternatives to *shall* in order to improve legal certainty across different language versions.

3. *Shall* and Simple Future Tense

Both *shall* and the future tense may replicate semantic polyvalence, which can lead to ambiguity. To illustrate, there is a correspondence between the five primary uses of *shall*, as defined in Garner (2004), and their counterparts of the Spanish simple future as shown in Table 2. In all instances, *shall* is rendered using the Spanish simple future tense, which —as noted by RAE (2009), Escandell-Vidal (2010, 2018) and Lara-Bermejo (2016)— can express not only future actions but also commands, requests, warnings, threats and commitments, often articulated in the third person in normative or instructional contexts.

Use of *shall* (Garner 2004)	General English meaning	Observed Spanish translation	Function of Spanish simple future
1. *Has a duty to / is required to*	Obligation	Simple future	1. Mandate or instruction (often in 3rd person)
2. *Should*	Recommendation	Simple future	2. Advice
3. *May*	Permission/ possibility	Simple future	3. Polite request
4. *Will*	Future event	Simple future	4. Temporal future; may also imply intention, promise or threat depending on context
5. *Is entitled to*	Legal right/ entitlement	Simple future	5. Commitment

Table 2. *Shall* and the Spanish simple future tense

To reduce the potential ambiguity of the simple future, and following plain language recommendations, alternative verbal strategies may be employed in Spanish, such as the periphrasis *deber + infinitive*, which clearly expresses obligation. Furthermore, RAE (2009), Parramon i Blasco (2017) and Serrano (2021) identify the present indicative as the prototypical form for conveying normative content. In line with this, the *Manual de lenguaje claro y estilo* (Tula del Moral and Núñez Gelvez 2021) recommends the use of the present tense in normative texts to enhance clarity and reduce imprecision.

4. Methodology

This study focuses on the creation of a parallel corpus of European directives where we analyse different aspects to answer the research questions stated above. To begin with, we created a parallel corpus of delegated directives which allowed us to carry out a contrastive analysis. The corpus would lead us to identify the uses of *shall* in English, in contrast to the uses of the simple future tense in Spanish. In particular, we selected the specific context where enacting terms are expressed in order to scrutinise the frequency of modal verbs and their Spanish counterparts. This approach follows previous research in Spanish administrative law (Montané 2022; Pistola and da Cunha 2024), where corpora of administrative texts were analysed to identify and clarify recurring phraseology.

4.1. Selection Criteria for Corpus Compilation

The study adopts a corpus linguistics approach. Corpus compilation was informed by previous research in the field of Spanish administrative law (Da Cunha and Montané 2020; Da Cunha and Escobar 2021; Pistola 2022) where the authors analysed specialised textual genres in the domains of administration and tourism. Building on this methodological framework, the present study applies both quantitative and qualitative analyses to a body of delegated directives. A total of 20 delegated directives were selected from the EUR-Lex database using the "Advanced Search" function based on specific criteria. In particular, the selection criteria applied to compile the corpus of delegated directives used in this study were as follows:

a. Subgenre: Delegated directives specifically amending previous directives.
b. Issuer and Audience: Issued by the European Commission and directed to Member States and EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway).
c. Target Groups: Addressed to EU Member States, relevant stakeholders and the general public.
d. Time Frame: Published between 2019 and 2024. Delegated Directives issued prior to 2019 were excluded to ensure the selection of up-to-date texts.
e. Length: Between 2 and 4 pages to maintain comparability in document scope.
f. Content: Covering a variety of topics to ensure thematic diversity, such as exemptions of certain substances, sustainability factors, modifications to vehicle category designations, standards for marine equipment, methodologies for estimating atmospheric pollutant emissions, inland transport of dangerous goods, manufacturing, tobacco product regulation and financial issues.
g. Format: Preference was given to documents primarily consisting of written text; texts composed mainly of tables were excluded.

A total of 86 delegated directives were initially compiled in both languages, as shown in Table 3. The resulting corpora consist of 15,298 words in English and 17,670 words in Spanish. Following the application of the selection criteria outlined above, 53 directives were retained for analysis. The remaining 33 were excluded due to factors such as insufficient textual content, excessive length or redundancy.

Genre	No. of compiled texts	No. of valid texts	No. of invalid texts
Delegated Directive	86	53	33

Table 3. Number of compiled, valid and invalid texts

The total number of directives initially identified per year, their approximate length, the number retained for analysis and those excluded is given in Table 4. Most retained documents were published between 2020 and 2023 and had a manageable length (2-4 pages). Older documents, especially from 2019 and earlier, were often excluded due to outdated content or because they appeared as corrigenda. Other reasons for exclusion included excessive length, limited textual content or redundancy across topics. This structured selection ensures that the pilot study focuses on current, representative and textually rich examples of EU legislative drafting.

Publication Year	Total Directives	Length	Documents Retained	Documents Excluded
2024	3	2 short, 1 long	2	1
2023	6	4 short, 1 medium, 1 long	3	3
2022	17	17 short	4	13
2021	13	11 short, 2 long	8	5
2020	10	9 short, 1 long	3	7
2019	13	13 short	0	13
2018	7	—	0	7
2015	1	—	0	1
2019-2024 (Corrigenda)	16	—	0	16
Total	**86**		**20**	**66**

Table 4. Selected corpus of delegated directives

4.2. Digital Extraction of Modal Verbs

To analyse modality from the legal-drafting perspective in the chosen delegated directives, it was necessary to measure the frequency of the modal verb *shall* and the simple future tense in the Spanish counterpart. For this purpose, Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques were applied using spaCy. These functionalities allowed for the precise identification and classification of verbs in the corpora. In English, occurrences of *shall* were counted by matching tokens whose text (in any case) was exactly *shall* regardless of their position in the sentence, lemma or part of speech. In Spanish, instances of the simple future were detected automatically by selecting finite verbs tagged with Tense=Fut in spaCy's morphological features, ensuring that only synthetic forms (e.g. *publicarán, entrará*, *adoptarán*) were counted.

While NLP techniques facilitated the automatic identification of these verb forms, the interpretation of their speech act (prescriptive vs. performative) was conducted manually. This classification distinguished between modals used in prescriptive speech acts —which impose obligations, grant permissions or offer recommendations— and those found in performative utterances, which enact legal effects upon being stated. The extraction process involved the following steps:

a. Corpus processing: The text files containing the directives were segmented into five different predefined sections: heading, preamble, enacting terms, closing and annex using regular expressions to detect structural markers.
b. Verb detection: The English corpus was analysed with spaCy to extract all occurrences of the modal verb *shall*. The Spanish corpus was analysed in the same way to extract all verbs in the simple future tense.
c. Frequency calculation: For each section and for the full corpus, absolute and relative frequencies (normalised to 1,000 words) were computed.
d. Data aggregation and visualisation: The section-level frequencies for both corpora were aggregated and represented in grouped bar charts to compare the distribution of *shall* and the Spanish simple future.

5. Parallel Corpus Study Results

In this section, we present the main findings from the parallel corpus, focusing on the enacting terms of the selected delegated directives. The analysis aims to determine whether *shall* in English and the simple future tense in Spanish convey similar types of modality in these enacting terms, ranging from strict obligation or requirement to a mere reference to a future event. For this purpose, we first present the frequency of *shall* and the simple future tense; second, we examine their distribution according to Felici's (2012) category distinctions; and, third, we discuss the results of applying specific plain-language recommendations to certain uses of *shall* and the simple future tense in the same enacting terms.

5.1. Frequency of *Shall* and Future Tense in Directives

To begin with, we analysed the distribution of the modal *shall* across the entire corpus. First, each directive was divided into sections according to its structure in both English and Spanish. These sections include the headings, preambles, enacting terms, closings and annexes. This segmentation allowed us to observe the frequency of the verb and its distribution across the different sections of each directive.

We divided the number of occurrences of *shall* by the total number of words in each section and normalised the results to 1,000 words, which allowed for comparison across sections regardless of their actual length. The results indicate that *shall* is concentrated in the enacting terms, reflecting its role in expressing binding provisions within the main body of the directive.

Moreover, we calculated the relative frequency of *shall* in the entire corpus: 10.92 occurrences per 1,000 words. This result confirms its prevalence in this legal genre, despite recommendations from plain language advocates to replace it with other verbs, such as *must* or *may* (Guarino 2023).

Next, we counted the total occurrences of *shall* and the Spanish simple future tense in each section of both corpora. This allowed us to identify patterns in the English corpus and its Spanish counterpart. In total, 167 occurrences of *shall* and 204 of the Spanish simple future were classified according to their performative or prescriptive function.

Regarding the relative frequency of the simple future in the entire corpus, we observed that it is slightly higher than in English, at 11.54 occurrences per 1,000 words, with an absolute frequency of 204. This higher frequency indicates that the simple future is the standard way to express obligation in Spanish legal drafting, whereas *shall* in English is used more selectively. The contrast in the relative frequency of both verbs is shown in Figure 1, adjusted for the length of each section within documents.

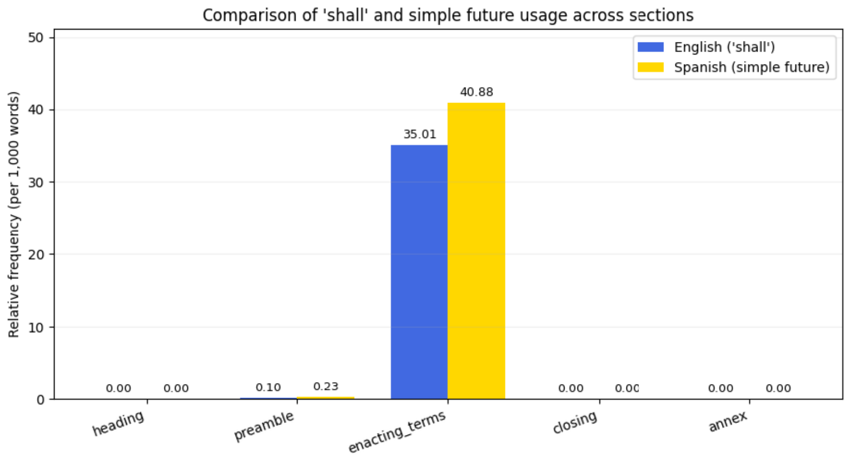

Figure 1. Relative frequency across sections in the parallel corpus

5.2. Identification of Categories

A second main finding of the contrastive study was the identification of all occurrences of *shall* and the simple future tense in the parallel corpus, classified according to the categories proposed by Felici (2012). These categories include necessary requirements, constitutive statements, deontic, anankastic, entitlements, authorisations, negative requirements and prohibitions. The corpus contains a total of 167 occurrences of *shall*, each translated into Spanish with the simple future tense. To illustrate these uses, we focused on recurring phrases appearing in at least 50% of the corpus, which identified 120 instances of utterances containing *shall*. One example of each case is provided in Table 5. Following Gibová (2011), the use of *shall* remains predominantly prescriptive when directives require intervention from an active agent to achieve a specific goal.

Shall	**The future tense**
(1) Deontic modality- obligation Member States *shall adopt and publish* by [date.] at the latest, the laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with this Directive. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	(1) Deontic modality- obligation Los Estados miembros *adoptarán y publicarán*, a más tardar [fecha], las disposiciones legales, reglamentarias y administrativas necesarias para dar cumplimiento a lo establecido en la presente Directiva. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)

(2) Deontic modality- obligation They (Member States) *shall (forthwith) communicate* to the Commission the text of those provisions. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	(2) Deontic modality- obligation *Comunicarán* inmediatamente a la Comisión el texto de dichas disposiciones. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)
(3) Deontic modality- obligation Member States *shall determine* how such reference is to be made. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2022/2407)	(3) Deontic modality- obligation Los Estados miembros *establecerán* las modalidades de la mencionada referencia. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2022/2407)
(4) Deontic modality- obligation Member States *shall communicate* to the Commission the text of the main provisions of national law which they adopt in the field covered by this Directive. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	(4) Deontic modality- obligation Los Estados miembros *comunicarán* a la Comisión el texto de las principales disposiciones de Derecho interno que adopten en el ámbito regulado por la presente Directiva. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)
(5) Deontic modality- obligation They (Member States) *shall apply* those provisions/measures from [date]. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2022/1631)	(5) Deontic modality- obligation *Aplicarán* dichas disposiciones a partir de [fecha]. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2022/1631)
(6) Constitutive statement This Directive *shall enter into force* on the twentieth day that of its publication/on the following day that of its publication/on the day its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	(6) Constitutive statement La presente Directiva *entrará en vigor* a los veinte días de su publicación en el Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)

Table 5. Typology of *shall* and the future tense in the enacting terms of the parallel corpus

As illustrated in Table 5, most examples of recurring phrases are deontic in nature, confirming that the use of *shall* is appropriate in the enacting terms of delegated directives. The parallel corpus study identified 20 distinct prescriptive contexts in which *shall* and the simple future tense are used to impose legal obligations, establish compliance requirements or assign duties to Member States. In these cases, *shall* and the simple future tense preceded verbs in either active or passive forms, such as *adopt (adoptar)*, *publish (publicar)*, *communicate (comunicar)*, *determine (determinar)*, *apply (aplicar)*, *be laid down (establecer* in the active voice*)*, *require (requerir)*, *identify (identificar)*, *assess (evaluar)*, *consider (considerar)*, *reconsider (reconsiderar)*, *notify (notificar)*, *establish (establecer)*, *bring into force (poner en vigor)*, *ensure (garantizar)*, *be accompanied (ir acompañado)*, *be presented (ser* *presentado), be reviewed (ser revisado) and be exempted (estar exento)*. In contrast, and to a much lesser extent, eight performative contexts were identified, which predict future performance and precede verbs such as *contain (contener)*, *enter into force (entrar en vigor)*, *apply (aplicar)*, *be accompanied (ir acompañado)*, *carry (llevar)*, *include (incluir)*, *comprise (determinar)* and *exceed (exceder)*.

5.3. A Proposal for the Application of Plain Language Recommendations

Once the categories of *shall* in English and the future tense in Spanish have been established in the parallel corpus of enacting terms, the corresponding plain language recommendations should be applied. First, the original sentences, together with our proposed revisions, are presented in Table 6, where alternative formulations aim to enhance clarity without altering the legal effect.

Source recurring phrases	**Version validated by experts**
(1) Member States *shall adopt and publish* by, [adoption and publication deadlines for Member States to implement the Directive into their national laws] at the latest, the laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with this Directive. They *shall forthwith communicate* to the Commission the text of those provisions.	(1) Member States *shall adopt and publish* by, [adoption and publication deadlines for Member States to implement the Directive into their national laws] at the latest, the laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with this Directive. They *shall inform* the Commission of the text of those provisions promptly.
(2) They *shall apply* those provisions from [date of application for the amendment].	(2) They *shall apply* those provisions from [date of application for the amendment].
(3) When Member States adopt those provisions, they *shall contain* a reference to this Directive or be accompanied by such a reference on the occasion of their official publication. Member States s*hall determine* how such reference is to be made.	(3) When Member States adopt those provisions, they *shall contain* or refer to this Directive with this particular reference on the occasion of their official publication. Member States *shall determine* how to make this reference.
(4) Member States *shall communicate* to the Commission the text of the main provisions of national law, which they adopt in the field covered by this Directive.	(4) Member States *shall communicate* to the Commission the text of the main provisions of national law, which they adopt in the field covered by this Directive.
(5) This Directive *shall enter into force* on the day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.	(5) This Directive *enters into force* on the following day of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

Table 6. *Shall* in recurring phrases and clearer alternatives

As discussed in the previous section, our proposed revisions, as summarised in Table 6, maintain the claim that *shall* is generally appropriate in deontic contexts, as illustrated in examples (1)-(4). In contrast, a shift to the present simple can enhance clarity without compromising legal precision in constitutive contexts, as can be seen in example (5). The recurring phrase "This Directive shall enter into force on the day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union" represents a constitutive statement in Felici's (2012) classification, since it establishes a legal state of affairs rather than imposing an obligation on an agent. For this reason, we reformulated it in the present simple: "This Directive enters into force on the day of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union", which more clearly expresses the intended effect without the ambiguity associated with *shall*.

Secondly, beyond the recurring phrases, and given the importance of distinguishing functions, we also analysed other instances of *shall* in the enacting terms. Ten corresponded to anankastic *shall* (necessary requirements), for which Felici (2012) recommends *must* as the clearer alternative. We also identified one instance of ambiguity in deontic modality due to agentless construction and one negative requirement, where *must* likewise ensures clarity. The remaining occurrences include three constitutive statements, best expressed in the simple present, and the rest are deontic, where *shall* remains the clearest option. All instances of non-recurring contexts where *shall* appears together with our proposal of clearer alternatives are illustrated, as in Table 7.

Non-recurring uses of shall and proposed alternatives	
Anankastic *shall* (necessary requirement) (1) The methods of making such reference *shall be laid down* by the Member States. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	Anankastic *shall* (necessary requirement) (1) The methods of making such reference *must be laid down* by the Member States. (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)
Negative proposition (2) [...] the thresholds s*hall not exceed* [quantity] for the balance sheet total [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2023/2775)	Negative proposition (2) [...] the thresholds *must not exceed* [quantity] for the balance sheet total [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2023/2775)
Ambiguity in deontic modality due to agentless constructions (3) [...] they (measures) *shall contain* a reference to this Directive [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	Ambiguity in deontic modality due to agentless constructions (3) [...] they (measures) *must contain* a reference to this Directive [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)

Table 7. Non-recurring uses of *shall* and clearer alternatives

Overall, the European Commission's drafting exhibits little ambiguity in this corpus, as *shall* is consistently used with a deontic value to impose obligations, in accordance with established conventions. However, we identified 16 instances among the 167 occurrences of *shall* in the enacting terms across the entire corpus —comprising anankastic *shall*, constitutive statements, one instance of deontic ambiguity, and one negative requirement— in which clearer alternatives such as *must* or the present simple are precise and do not alter the legal effect.

Finally, the analysis of Spanish enacting terms was conducted to identify the verbal counterparts in recurring phrases in plain language, as shown in Table 8. The enacting terms in the source directives are presented in column 1, and our proposed clearer alternatives are presented in column 2, following the recommendations of previous authors.

Source recurring phrases in Spanish	**Proposed clearer alternatives**
Deontic modality-obligation	Deontic modality-obligation
(1) Los Estados miembros *adoptarán y publicarán*, a más tardar [fecha], las disposiciones legales, reglamentarias y administrativas necesarias para dar cumplimiento a lo establecido en la presente Directiva.	(1) Los Estados miembros *deberán adoptar y publicar*, a más tardar [fecha], las disposiciones legales, reglamentarias y administrativas necesarias para dar cumplimiento a lo establecido en la presente Directiva.
Deontic modality-obligation	Deontic modality-obligation
(2) (Los Estados Miembros) **C***omunicarán* inmediatamente a la Comisión el texto de dichas disposiciones.	(Los Estados Miembros) *Deberán comunicar* inmediatamente a la Comisión el texto de dichas disposiciones.
Deontic modality-obligation	Deontic modality-obligation
(3) (Los Estados Miembros) *Aplicarán* dichas disposiciones a partir de [fecha].	(3) (Los Estados Miembros) *Deberán aplicar* dichas disposiciones a partir de [fecha].
Deontic modality-obligation	Deontic modality-obligation
(4) Los Estados miembros **e***stablecerán* las modalidades de la mencionada referencia.	(4) Los Estados miembros *deberán establecer* las modalidades de la mencionada referencia.
Deontic modality-obligation	Deontic modality-obligation
(5) Los Estados miembros *comunicarán* a la Comisión el texto de las principales disposiciones de Derecho interno que adopten en el ámbito regulado por la presente Directiva.	(5) Los Estados miembros *deberán comunicar* a la Comisión el texto de las principales disposiciones de Derecho interno que adopten en el ámbito regulado por la presente Directiva.
Constitutive statement	Constitutive statement
(6) La presente Directiva *entrará en vigor* a los veinte días de su publicación en el Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea.	(6) La presente Directiva *entrará en vigor* a los veinte días de su publicación en el Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea.

Source recurring phrases in Spanish	Proposed clearer alternatives
Necessary requirement	Necessary requirement
(7) Los Estados miembros *establecerán* las modalidades de la mencionada referencia. (Commission Delegated Directive. (EU) 2021/1716)	(7) Los Estados miembros *deben establecer* las modalidades de la mencionada referencia. (Commission Delegated Directive. (EU) 2021/1716)
Negative proposition	Negative proposition
(8) [...] los umbrales *no rebasarán* los [cantidad] en el total del balance [...] Commission Delegated Directive. (EU) 2023/2775)	(8) [...] los umbrales *no deben rebasar* los [cantidad] en el total del balance [...] Commission Delegated Directive. (EU) 2023/2775)
Ambiguity in deontic modality due to agentless constructions	Ambiguity in deontic modality due to agentless constructions
(9) [...] estas (medidas) *incluirán* una referencia a la presente Directiva [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)	(9) [...] estas (medidas) *deben incluir* una referencia a la presente Directiva [...] (Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716)

Table 8. Future simple tense in recurring phrases and alternatives in Spanish

Our proposed Spanish alternatives in Table 8 illustrate the interaction between modality and tense in both prescriptive contexts, as follows: i) deontic obligation, expressed with *deber* in the simple future tense, which explicitly marks obligation; ii) necessary requirements, expressed with *deber* in the present simple, which retains the prescriptive intent while signalling an anankastic meaning (i.e. a condition that must be fulfilled in order to achieve a goal). For constitutive statements, such as "*La Directiva entrará en vigor*", we retained the simple future tense, as it conveys temporal futurity rather than deontic force. Finally, for agentless constructions or negative requirements, the use of *deber* in the simple present reduces ambiguity by clearly denoting obligation.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the use of the modal verb *shall* in 20 delegated directives drafted in English between 2020 and 2024, together with their Spanish translations retrieved from the EUR-Lex database. Our aim was to shed light on the lack of balance between simplicity and precision when using modality in European legal drafting, already attested by the European Commission (Legal Service 2015). Overall, the findings confirm that while the Commission's drafting practices are largely consistent, targeted adjustments could further enhance clarity in both languages. Alternatives such as *must* were not employed in deontic contexts. In contrast, we recommend using the present simple tense to reduce ambiguity in constitutive statements in both English and Spanish. These results align with broader concerns raised in the literature (RAE 2009; Escandell-Vidal 2010, 2018; Lara-Bermejo 2016) regarding the modal weakening and polyfunctionality of the Spanish future tense.

The quantitative analysis identified 167 occurrences of *shall* in the English corpus and 204 occurrences of the simple future tense in the Spanish corpus. In both languages, these forms are concentrated in the enacting terms, highlighting their role in imposing obligations. However, while *shall* is used more selectively in prescriptive contexts, the Spanish future tense is distributed more widely across sections, reflecting a broader functional scope. This greater reliance on the simple future reinforces its status as the default device for expressing obligation in Spanish. Following RAE (2009) and Escandell-Vidal (2010, 2018), other devices, such as the periphrasis *deber + infinitive*, also express obligation and reduce ambiguity. We further recommend their use for the sake of clarity.

Building on Felici's (2012) categories, all occurrences of *shall* and the Spanish simple future were classified as deontic, anankastic, constitutive, entitlements, authorisations, negative requirements or prohibitions. The majority were deontic in nature, confirming that *shall* is generally used appropriately in delegated directives. However, out of 167 instances of *shall* in the enacting terms, 16 revealed potential for clearer alternatives: 10 anankastic uses, three constitutive statements, one negative requirement and one ambiguous deontic use. In these cases, alternatives such as *must* or the present simple provide more explicit marking of obligation or constitutive effect. Reformulating recurring phrases such as "This Directive shall enter into force […]" as "This Directive enters into force […]" demonstrates that such changes enhance clarity without undermining precision. The corpus also revealed 20 distinct prescriptive contexts in English in which *shall* is used to impose duties (e.g. *adopt, publish, notify, establish*), and eight performative contexts, where *shall* marks future states or conditions (e.g. *contain, enter into force, include*). This distribution further supports the need to distinguish prescriptive from performative uses when applying plain language recommendations.

Our proposal of clearer alternatives in Spanish distinguishes between functions. Deontic obligation is best expressed with *deber* in the simple future, which marks obligation explicitly and conveys the binding force of the provision. By contrast, necessary requirements are expressed with *deber* in the present simple, which retains the prescriptive intent but signals an anankastic meaning. Constitutive statements (e.g. *"La Directiva entrará en vigor"*) are maintained in the simple future, as they convey temporal futurity rather than obligation. Furthermore, in agentless constructions or negative requirements, *deber* in the present simple tense reduces ambiguity, since it unambiguously denotes obligation. This difference shows how the Spanish verbal system can disambiguate functions that remain problematic in English, thereby aligning legal drafting with principles of clarity and precision.

Finally, the data-driven recommendations align with ongoing calls for plain legal drafting made by institutions such as Clarity International, the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) and the European Commission itself. Ensuring greater uniformity and adopting clearer alternatives where appropriate would not diminish legal certainty but would instead enhance readability and reduce the risk of misinterpretation across multilingual versions of EU law. The main limitation of the parallel corpus is that translation choices and structural differences between the languages can prevent exact equivalence, limiting the generalisability of observed patterns. Looking ahead, the methodology developed here should be extended to a larger corpus of EU legal genres in order to assess the consistency of modal usage across text types and further explore its implications for clarity and precision in multilingual drafting.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this paper was presented at the GERAS46 Conference held in Lyon (France). The author(s) would like to thank the organisers and participants for their valuable feedback, as well as the experts who validated the proposed English clearer alternatives: Dr. Eva Samaniego Fernández, Dr. Dirk Merckx and Public Prosecutor José Ignacio Monreal Bueno, who provided suggestions and validated the clarification of our corpus. This article is supported by the grant "Plain language and natural language processing in legal-administrative texts in English: the European Commission as a case study" (EUPlainTech) (PID2022-143092NB-I00), funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by FEDER, UE.

Contribution of the Authors

The present paper is the contribution of two authors. Author 1 oversaw the theoretical framework, as well as the compilation, processing and analysis of the corpus, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Author 2 introduced the study of modality in directives, contributed relevant literature to the theoretical framework and was responsible for structuring, guiding and reviewing the manuscript. Both authors participated in the writing and final revision of the entire work.

Notes

1. SpaCy is an NLP library designed for text processing. It provides pre-trained language models in both English (en_core_web_sm) and Spanish (es_core_news_sm), which include key features such as lemmatisation, part-of-speech (POS) tagging and syntactic dependency parsing (Honnibal and Montani 2017).

Works Cited

Andone, Corina and Florin Coman-Kund. 2017. "Argumentative Patterns in the European Union's Directives: An Effective Tool to Foster Compliance by the Member States". *Journal of Argumentation in Context* 6 (1): 76-96. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315957182_Argumentative_patterns_in_the_European_Union's_directives_An_effective_tool_to_foster_compliance_by_the_Member_States>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford U.P.

Cooper, Paul K. 2011. *Is There a Case for the Abolition of 'Shall' from EU Legislation?* Riga Graduate School of Law. <https://www.rgsl.edu.lv/uploads/research-papers-list/22/1-cooper-final.pdf>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Crystal, David and Derek Davy. 1969. *Investigating English Style*. Longman.

Da Cunha, Iria. (ed.) 2022. *Lenguaje claro y tecnología en la Administración*. Comares.

Da Cunha, Iria and M.ª Ángeles Escobar. 2021. "Recomendaciones sobre lenguaje claro en español en el ámbito jurídico-administrativo: análisis y clasificación". *Pragmalingüística* (29): 129-148. <https://doi.org/10.25267/Pragmalinguistica.2021.i29.07>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Da Cunha, Iria and M. Amor Montané. 2020. "A Corpus-Based Analysis of Textual Genres in the Administration Domain". *Discourse Studies* 22 (1): 3-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445619887538>.

Del Monte, Micaela and Rafael Manko. 2021. *Understanding Delegated and Implementing Acts*. European Parliamentary Research Service. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690709/EPRS_BRI(2021)690709_EN.pdf >. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Directorate-General for Translation (European Commission). 2012. *How to Write Clearly*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2782/54318>.

Escandell-Vidal, M. Victoria. 2010. "Futuro y evidencialidad". *Anuario de Lingüística Hispánica* 26: 9-34. <https://uvadoc.uva.es/handle/10324/9480>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Escandell-Vidal, M. Victoria. 2018. "El futuro simple del español. Sistema natural frente a usos cultivados". *Verba Hispánica* 26 (1): 15-33. <https://journals.uni-lj.si/VerbaHispanica/article/view/8327>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Escobar, M.ª Ángeles and Eva Samaniego. 2022. "Análisis contrastivo inglés-español de las recomendaciones sobre lenguaje claro en el ámbito jurídico-administrativo en los últimos 10 años dentro de la Unión Europea". In Da Cunha, Iria (ed.): 15-40.

EUR-Lex. n.d. *European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

European Commission. 2021. *Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2021/1716 amending Directive 2014/47/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards Modifications to the Vehicle Category Designations Stemming from Amendments to the Typeapproval Legislation.* <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021L1716>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Commission. 2022. *Commission Delegated Directive 2022/2407 Amending the Annexes to Directive 2008/68/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council to Take into Account Scientific and Technical Progress*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022L2407>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Commission. 2022. *Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2022/1631 Amending, for the Purposes of Adapting to Scientific and Technical Progress, Annex IV to Directive 2011/65/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards an Exemption for the Use of Lead in Bismuth Strontium Calcium Copper Oxide Superconductor Cables and Wires and Lead in their Electrical Connections.* <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022L1631>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Commission. 2023. *Commission Delegated Directive (EU) 2023/2775 Amending Directive 2013/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the Adjustments of the Size Criteria for Micro, Small, Medium-sized and Large Undertakings or Groups.* <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302775>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Commission. 2024. *English Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors and Translators in the European Commission*. 8th Edition. Knowledge Centre on Translation and Interpretation. <https://knowledge-centre-translation-interpretation.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ckeditor5-files/styleguide_english_dgt_en.pdf>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. 2003. *Directive 2003/87/EC Establishing a Scheme for Greenhouse Gas Emission Allowance Trading within the Community*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32003L0087>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. 2014. *Directive 2014/24/EU on Public Procurement and Repealing Directive 2004/18/EC.* <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014L0024>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

Felici, Annarita. 2012. "SHALL Ambiguities in EU Legislative Texts". *Comparative Legilinguistics* 10: 51-66. <https://doi.org/10.14746/cl.2012.10.04>.

Garner, Bryan A. (ed.) 2004. *Black's Law Dictionary*. 8th Edition. Thomson West Publishing Co.

Garner, Bryan A. 2013. *Legal Writing in Plain English: A Text with Exercises*. University of Chicago Press.

Garzone, Giuliana. 2013. "Variation in the Use of Modality in Legislative Texts: Focus on *shall*". *Journal of Pragmatics* 57: 68-81. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378216613001720>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Gibová, Klaudia. 2011. "On Modality in EU Institutional-legal Documents". *English Matters II: A Collection of Papers by the Institute of British and American Studies Faculty*: 6-12. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/ON-MODALITY-IN-EU-INSTITUTIONAL-LEGAL-DOCUMENTS-Gibov%C3%A1/c48e3d58c2653d0f7af45a50907320917b585994>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

GUARINO, Ornella. 2023. "English Language and European Union: A Corpus-Based Study of EU Secondary Legislation". *De Europa* 6 (1): 27-55. <https://doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/7140>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

HONNIBAL, Matthew and Inés MONTANI. 2017. *SpaCy 2: Natural Language Understanding with Bloom Embeddings, Convolutional Neural Networks and Incremental Parsing*. <https://spacy.io/>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

LARA-BERMEJO, Víctor. 2016. "La expresión del futuro en las lenguas romances de la Península Ibérica". *Boletín de la Real Academia Española* 96 (314): 529-558. <https://revistas.rae.es/brae/article/view/160>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Legal Service (European Commission). 2015. *Joint Practical Guide of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission for Persons Involved in the Drafting of European Union Legislation*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2880/5575>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

MATTILA, Heikki E.S. 2006. *Comparative Legal Linguistics*. Ashgate Publishers.

MELLINKOFF, David. 1963. *The Language of the Law*. Little, Brown and Company.

MONTANÉ, M. Amor. 2022. "Hacia la clarificación de la fraseología del ámbito de la Administración: un estudio basado en corpus". In Da Cunha, Iria (ed.): 41-75.

PARRAMON I BLASCO, Jordi. 2017. "Leyes sin futuro: El uso de los tiempos en la traducción de textos normativos". *Punto y Coma: Boletín de los traductores españoles de las instituciones de la Unión Europea* 151: 1-4. <https://www.parlament.cat/document/intrade/204007>. Accessed April 1, 2026.

PISTOLA, Sara. 2022. "Análisis de la estructura y contenidos de un corpus de géneros textuales". In DA CUNHA, Iria (ed.): Comares: 77-116.

PISTOLA, Sara and DA CUNHA, Iria. 2024. "Análisis y clarificación de un corpus de fraseología administrativa: una propuesta orientada al uso del lenguaje claro en la Administración española". *Logos: Revista de Lingüística, Filosofía y Literatura* 34 (2): 494-522. <https://revistas.userena.cl/index.php/logos/article/view/2419>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Real Academia Española y Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. 2009. *Nueva gramática de la lengua española* (Vol. 2). Espasa Libros.

Real Academia Española y Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. 2022. *Red panhispánica de lenguaje claro y accesible*. <https://www.rae.es/la-institucion/red-panhispanica-de-lenguaje-claro-y-accesible>. Accessed August 23, 2025.

Real Academia Española y Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. 2024. *Guía panhispánica de lenguaje claro y accesible*. <https://www.rae.es/sites/default/files/2025-10/Guía panhispánica de lenguaje claro y accesible.pdf>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

SEARLE, John R. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge U.P.

SEARLE, John R. 1975. "Indirect Speech Acts". In Cole, Peter and Jerry. L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts.* Academic Press: 59-82. <https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004368811/BP000004.xml>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

SERRANO, María José. 2021. "La modalidad deóntica como (de)subjetivación del discurso: variación entre las perífrasis haber/tener que + infinitivo". *Anuario de Letras. Lingüística y Filología* 9 (2): 43-79. <https://doi.org/10.19130/iifl.adel.2021.9.2.47362>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Tanner, Edwin. 2006. "Clear, Simple, and Precise Legislative Drafting: How Does a European Community Directive Fare?" *Statute Law Review* 27 (3): 150-175. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/slr/hml007>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Thegel, Miriam and Josefin Lindgren. 2020. "Subjective and Intersubjective Modality: A Quantitative Approach to Spanish Modal Verbs". *Studia Neophilologica*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2020.1724822> Accessed December 3, 2025.

Tiersma, Peter M. 1999. *Legal Language*. University of Chicago Press.

Tula del Moral, María Lorena and Paula Núñez Gelvez. 2021. *Manual de lenguaje claro y estilo*. Editorial Jusbaires. <https://www.ivap.euskadi.eus/r612347/es/contenidos/informacion/bibl_digital/es_documen/adjuntos/Manual-de-lenguaje-claro-y-estilo.pdf>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Williams, Christopher. 2005. *Tradition and Change in Legal English: Verbal Constructions in Prescriptive Texts*. Peter Lang. <https://www.academia.edu/1619328/Tradition_and_Change_in_Legal_English_Verbal_Constructions_in_Prescriptive_Texts>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Williams, Christopher. 2011. "Legal English and Plain Language: An Update". *ESP Across Cultures* 8: 139-151. <https://edipuglia.it/wp-content/uploads/ESP%202011/Williams.pdf>. Accessed December 3, 2025.

Received: 14/05/2025
Accepted: 05/12/2025

MEJORA DE LA PRONUNCIACIÓN DEL FONEMA CONSONÁNTICO /ʃ/ EN ESTUDIANTES ESPAÑOLES DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA MEDIANTE ACTIVIDADES DE DOBLAJE DIDÁCTICO

IMPROVING THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE CONSONANT PHONEME /ʃ/ IN SPANISH EFL LEARNERS THROUGH DIDACTIC DUBBING

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202612888

LUCAS BAEYENS
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha
lucas.baeyens@uclm.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9094-9740

Resumen

Pese a la atención limitada que se le otorga a la pronunciación en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera, lograr una pronunciación inteligible constituye un elemento esencial para una comunicación eficaz. En este sentido, una producción precisa de la mayoría de fonemas consonánticos del inglés resulta clave para la inteligibilidad (Jenkins 2000), lo que subraya la necesidad de implementar en el aula actividades innovadoras y motivadoras para desarrollar la competencia fonológica. Este estudio analiza la eficacia de actividades de doblaje intralingüístico didáctico, una modalidad de traducción audiovisual didáctica, para la mejora de la producción del fonema /ʃ/ en estudiantes españoles de inglés. Se siguió un diseño cuasiexperimental en tres fases (pretest, intervención-doblaje y postest), con una muestra de estudiantes del Grado en Educación Primaria (n = 71), divididos en un grupo de control (n = 34) y un grupo experimental (n = 37), recabando datos relevantes para su posterior análisis mediante pruebas estadísticas no paramétricas. Los resultados evidencian una mejora estadísticamente significativa en la producción del fonema /ʃ/ en el grupo experimental tras la intervención, lo que sugiere que el doblaje didáctico favorece la toma de conciencia fonética y contribuye a mejorar la inteligibilidad en el aula de EFL.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de lenguas, doblaje didáctico, pronunciación del inglés, fonología del inglés, traducción audiovisual didáctica.

Abstract

Despite the limited attention paid to pronunciation in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, achieving intelligible pronunciation remains essential for effective communication. In this regard, accurate production of most English consonant phonemes is key to intelligibility (Jenkins 2000), which highlights the need to implement innovative and motivating classroom activities aimed at developing learners' phonological competence. This study examines the effectiveness of didactic intralingual dubbing activities, one of the most researched didactic audiovisual translation modes, in improving the production of the /ʃ/ phoneme among Spanish learners of English. A three-phase quasi-experimental design (pre-test, dubbing intervention, and post-test) was adopted with a sample of Primary Education degree students (n = 71), divided into a control group (n = 34) and an experimental group (n = 37). Relevant data were collected and subsequently analysed using non-parametric statistical tests. The results reveal a statistically significant improvement in the production of the /ʃ/ phoneme in the experimental group following the intervention, suggesting that didactic dubbing promotes phonetic awareness and contributes to improved intelligibility in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: language teaching, didactic dubbing, English pronunciation, English phonology, didactic audiovisual translation.

1. Introducción

1.1. Comunicación global, inteligibilidad y consonantes problemáticas del inglés para hablantes españoles

De acuerdo a las últimas estimaciones, la lengua inglesa cuenta con cerca de 1100 millones de hablantes como segunda lengua/lengua extranjera, lo que ha consolidado su posición como la *lingua franca* global (Eberhard et al. 2024, 2025). En este contexto, donde cada vez resultan más frecuentes las interacciones en inglés entre hablantes no nativos, destaca el concepto de inteligibilidad ("*being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation*", Kenworthy 1987: 13) como llave de acceso a una comunicación eficaz y eficiente. En este sentido, la inteligibilidad, que pone el foco en el entendimiento del mensaje en sí, se distingue de otros constructos próximos en el ámbito de la pronunciación y que se sitúan en el punto de vista del oyente, como la noción de *accentedness*, centrado en la distancia entre una producción en lengua extranjera de un modelo nativo o la comprensibilidad (*comprehensibility*), que destaca la facilidad o dificultad del oyente para comprender un mensaje (Munro y Derwing 1995; Derwing y Munro

2015). Esta distinción resulta especialmente relevante en contextos de inglés como *lingua franca*, donde una producción con rasgos no nativos puede seguir siendo perfectamente inteligible. En consecuencia, la inteligibilidad adquiere un papel central en la enseñanza de la pronunciación, de modo que, desde enfoques como el Lingua Franca Core (LFC) (Jenkins 2000), se insiste en priorizar una producción fonológica clara y comprensible por encima de la imitación de modelos nativos.

En consecuencia, el objetivo de una pronunciación inteligible en contextos educativos de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) ha ganado respaldo en la investigación actual, aunque no exento de debate. Mientras un número cada vez mayor de autores abogan por evitar que la pronunciación suponga un obstáculo comunicativo (Walker 2010; Rogerson-Revell 2011), otros instan al alumnado a desarrollar una conciencia fonológica más precisa, más allá del "campo base" que supone el concepto de inteligibilidad (Jones 1997). Lo que resulta evidente es que, en este mundo cada vez más globalizado, el concepto de inteligibilidad deja de estar vinculado únicamente al estándar nativo (Walker 2010), ni siquiera cuando esta se articula desde modelos de pronunciación estandarizados, como el *Received Pronunciation* (RP) o el *General American* (GA).

Sin embargo, la conexión entre los conceptos de inteligibilidad y el de precisión fonética no se encuentra en absoluto en polos opuestos, sino todo lo contrario. De acuerdo con el LFC, la mayor parte de consonantes del inglés requieren de una pronunciación precisa para evitar problemas comunicativos (Jenkins 2000). A esta relación debemos añadir la consideración de que se han identificado diversos fonemas que resultan particularmente problemáticos para estudiantes españoles de EFL y que afectan directamente a su inteligibilidad (Walker 2010; Rogerson-Revell 2011). Entre ellos, se encuentran sonidos inexistentes en el sistema fonológico del español, como la consonante /ʒ/ en *vision* o *pleasure*, fonemas similares, pero con diferencias relevantes, como la aspiración de las oclusivas /p/, /t/ y /k/ en inglés, o fonemas que, aunque aparecen en la L1, lo hacen como alófonos, como ocurre con /ð/ en la segunda <d> de *dado*.

Entre las consonantes más problemáticas para hispanohablantes se encuentra la consonante fricativa postalveolar sorda /ʃ/, que "no tiene una correspondencia ortográfica directa en ninguna de las variedades de español; es más, no es considerada en el inventario estándar del español, apareciendo como un alófono en variación libre" (Subiabre Ubilla 2020: 386). Aunque esta consonante sí aparece como variante (Silva Valencia 2022) en algunas zonas de Andalucía, República Dominicana, Cuba o Panamá (en alguna de ellas, incluso con connotaciones sociales (Subiabre Ubilla 2020)) no existe en el español peninsular estándar, lo que favorece su sustitución por fonemas cercanos como /s/ o /tʃ/, generando confusiones como *shop* vs *chop* o *shame* vs *same* (Walker 2010; Rogerson-Revell

2011; Uribe-Enciso et al. 2019). A la dificultad articulatoria se suma la complejidad ortográfica del fonema, cuya representación en inglés, lejos de ser constante, resulta muy inestable. Aunque <sh> y <ti> surgen como las grafías más comunes, en palabras como *shop, she, introduction* o *attention,* la fricativa /ʃ/ también aparece en secuencias como <ch> o <che> (*chef*, *machine*), <ci> (*delicious*, *musician*), <s> o <ss> (*sure*, *sugar*), <si> o <ssi> (*pension*, *Russia*), <sci> (*conscience*, *luscious*), e incluso <c> o <ci> (*ocean*, *precious*). Esta variabilidad, unida a la consideración de que, en general, la ortografía del español posee un efecto claro en la pronunciación del inglés (Afonso 2021), puede inducir a los estudiantes a pronunciar de forma literal palabras como *definition* o *efficient*, generando errores como [ti] o [θi], que afectan negativamente a la inteligibilidad (Zhang 2023). Mejorar la producción de este fonema resulta, por tanto, crucial para la inteligibilidad en contextos de inglés como *lingua franca*.

Lo que resulta evidente es que la fricativa /ʃ/, al igual que otros muchos rasgos de la pronunciación inglesa, recibe una atención insuficiente en los entornos de enseñanza-aprendizaje de EFL. Tal como señalan Tlazalo y Basurto (2014), muchos docentes continúan mostrando inseguridad o escasa preparación al abordar la enseñanza de la pronunciación, a pesar de que el alumnado suele percibirla como absolutamente necesaria y útil. Incluso cuando se incluye en la planificación didáctica, su desarrollo no siempre responde a criterios competenciales o comunicativos. En este sentido, la motivación se erige como un factor determinante para el aprendizaje de la pronunciación, lo que pone de relieve la urgencia de implementar enfoques más atractivos y eficaces.

1.2. Doblaje didáctico

Ante las dificultades fonológicas y ortográficas detectadas en la mejora de las destrezas orales, propuestas metodológicas innovadoras como el doblaje didáctico emergen como soluciones intrigantes y motivadoras para la mejora de la pronunciación y la inteligibilidad en el aula de EFL.

El doblaje didáctico es una modalidad de Traducción Audiovisual Didáctica (TAD) que consiste en la sustitución de la pista de audio de un producto audiovisual por una nueva grabación realizada por el alumnado en la misma lengua que el clip original. Esta actividad puede desarrollarse de manera literal (replicando el mismo guion) o a través de alternativas más creativas en las que los estudiantes elaboran sus propios textos y los sincronizan con la imagen (*doblaje creativo*, Ávila-Cabrera 2022), dependiendo de los objetivos didácticos que se persigan. Esta práctica representa un paso más allá de la simple exposición pasiva a contenidos audiovisuales, ya que implica la creación activa de contenido por parte del estudiante, favoreciendo un cambio de rol: de consumidores pasivos a creadores proactivos (Talaván et al. 2024).

La aplicación del doblaje didáctico se fundamenta en múltiples principios pedagógicos actuales: el uso activo y didáctico de material audiovisual, la promoción del uso responsable y creativo de tecnologías en el aprendizaje de lenguas, el aprendizaje basado en tareas, la integración de destrezas o el desarrollo competencial, incluida la mediación (Talaván et al. 2024). Además, está demostrando ser una herramienta versátil y fácilmente adaptable a metodologías AICLE/CLIL o enseñanza en inglés (EMI, por sus siglas en inglés) (Fernández-Costales 2021), o incluso en la formación del profesorado (Tinedo-Rodríguez y Fernández-Costales 2025).

Aunque podemos considerar que la aparición del concepto de 'doblaje didáctico' *per se* es bastante reciente, encontramos ejemplos de aplicaciones didácticas de actividades de doblaje desde el cambio de siglo. Entre ellos podemos mencionar a Chiu (2012), que estudió la aplicación de actividades de doblaje en el desarrollo de la fluidez y la conciencia fonológica en estudiantes taiwaneses de inglés, Sánchez Requena (2016, 2018), que observó avances notables en la fluidez oral de estudiantes británicos de español como lengua extranjera, o a Talaván y Costal (2017), que mostraron el potencial del doblaje didáctico para la mejora de las destrezas orales en contextos digitales. Más recientemente, Baeyens (2023) subrayó su utilidad en la mejora de la pronunciación de fonemas específicos, como la consonante sonora /v/, problemática para estudiantes españoles de inglés. En conjunto, estas investigaciones subrayan

> la eficacia de esta modalidad para el desarrollo integrado de competencias, siendo de especial relevancia el desarrollo de la oralidad, uno de los mayores retos en la enseñanza de una lengua. Es decir, estos estudios demostraron que la producción oral podía mejorarse notablemente haciendo uso del doblaje didáctico. (Tinedo-Rodríguez y Fernández-Costales 2025: 3)

Aunque la mayoría de estos trabajos se han centrado en educación superior, se han diseñado e implementado iniciativas en etapas anteriores como primaria (Fernández-Costales 2021) y secundaria (Sánchez-Requena 2018), lo que demuestra la versatilidad del enfoque. Además de sus beneficios lingüísticos, especialmente en cuanto al desarrollo de destrezas orales, diversos estudios coinciden en resaltar el carácter motivador del doblaje didáctico (Burston 2005; Talaván y Costal 2017; Baeyens 2024; Talaván et al. 2024) al combinar elementos tecnológicos, creativos y expresivos que transforman el aprendizaje en una experiencia inmersiva, proactiva y atractiva, pudiendo combinarse fácilmente con otras modalidades de TAD, como el subtitulado, ampliando así su alcance pedagógico (Talaván y Ávila-Cabrera 2015).

En definitiva, el doblaje didáctico se perfila como una herramienta didáctica innovadora que responde a las necesidades actuales de enseñanza de lenguas. Su capacidad para fomentar la pronunciación, mejorar la fluidez, integrar habilidades y aumentar la motivación del alumnado lo consolidan como una estrategia eficaz para contextos de EFL.

2. Metodología

2.1. Participantes

La muestra de este estudio estuvo compuesta por un total de 71 estudiantes del primer curso del Grado en Educación Primaria de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), matriculados en la asignatura *Lengua Extranjera y su Didáctica I: Inglés*. Todos los participantes declararon poseer el castellano como lengua materna y mostraron un nivel aproximado de competencia en inglés entre A2 y B1+/B2, lo que podríamos considerar como *intermedio*. La edad media de la muestra se situó en torno a los 18-19 años.

Con el objetivo de asegurar la validez estadística, se respetó el criterio establecido por Cohen et al. (2007: 101), quienes recomiendan una muestra mínima de treinta sujetos en experimentación educativa para la aplicación de análisis estadísticos. La muestra se dividió en dos grupos: un grupo experimental (GE; n=37; 29 mujeres, 8 hombres) y un grupo de control (GC; n=34; 22 mujeres, 12 hombres), pertenecientes a dos cohortes consecutivas (GE: curso 2019-20; GC: curso 2020-21). Dado que los grupos pertenecían a cursos académicos distintos, se prestó especial atención a su comparabilidad inicial. Al comienzo de cada curso académico, todos los estudiantes realizaron una prueba de nivel (*placement test*) para determinar su competencia en lengua inglesa. Los resultados de dichas pruebas fueron comparados estadísticamente mediante una prueba Z, cuyos resultados indicaron que no existían diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre ambos grupos ($z = 0{,}8692$). Este resultado respalda la idea de que EG y CG partían de un nivel similar de competencia en lengua inglesa.

Finalmente, se garantizó la confidencialidad de los datos mediante la asignación de códigos alfanuméricos a cada participante. Asimismo, todas las fases del estudio cumplieron con los principios éticos y normativas de protección de datos.

2.2. Procesos de recogida y análisis de datos

El presente estudio adoptó un diseño cuasiexperimental con grupo de control no equivalente, con el fin de analizar los efectos de las actividades de doblaje didáctico sobre la pronunciación del fonema /ʃ/. La intervención se desarrolló en tres fases diferenciadas (Figura 1): grabaciones de pretest, realización del doblaje (solo aplicado al GE) y grabaciones de postest. En todas las fases, los participantes (sin conocerlo) trabajaron con los mismos textos, asegurando la comparabilidad fonológica entre grabaciones. Durante el periodo en que se establecieron todas las grabaciones, se estableció que no existiese enseñanza explícita o implícita del fonema /ʃ/ en el aula, por parte de ninguno de los dos grupos de estudio. De este modo, la exposición al fonema y su posible mejora quedaban vinculadas exclusivamente a la intervención con doblaje en el GE.

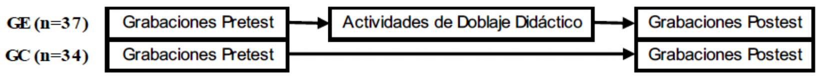

Figura 1. Fases del estudio y recogida de datos

Todos los audios fueron analizados individualmente para identificar la pronunciación del fonema /ʃ/ por parte de los participantes del estudio, utilizando una codificación binaria (correcta/incorrecta). Esta estrategia permitió transformar los datos cualitativos en cuantitativos, facilitar su tratamiento estadístico y aplicar la kappa de Cohen para evaluar la fiabilidad del proceso de codificación, como se detallará más adelante en este mismo apartado. Asimismo, la adopción de un criterio dicotómico se fundamenta en la relevancia funcional del fonema /ʃ/ desde el punto de vista de la inteligibilidad: en caso de producirse de manera incorrecta (por ejemplo, mediante la sustitución por la variante alveolar /s/, alternativa común producida por estudiantes españoles de inglés), puede generarse confusión léxica o pérdida de claridad en la comunicación. Por ello, se consideró pertinente establecer una distinción clara entre producciones adecuadas e inadecuadas del fonema objetivo. No obstante, se registraron igualmente todas las alternativas producidas, lo que permitirá preservar información fonética más detallada que podrá explorarse en futuros estudios. Para evaluar la fiabilidad intra-evaluador del proceso, un subconjunto de 630 observaciones (16,8% del total de la muestra), seleccionadas de manera aleatoria y representativas de todas las subdivisiones grupo-etapa, fue recodificado por el mismo investigador varios meses después, obteniéndose un resultado de $\kappa = 0{,}839$ (EE = 0,022; $p < 0{,}001$), tras aplicar la kappa de Cohen, lo que refleja una concordancia muy alta.

Para el análisis estadístico de los datos fonológicos obtenidos, se recurrió a pruebas no paramétricas, debido a la naturaleza de la muestra. Más concretamente, se aplicaron las pruebas de Wilcoxon y Mann-Whitney, equivalentes no paramétricos del t-test (Cohen et al. 2007: 552). La prueba de Wilcoxon se empleó para analizar comparaciones de muestras relacionadas, es decir, entre grabaciones de un mismo grupo en distintas fases del estudio (por ejemplo, pretest vs. postest del GE). Por su parte, la prueba de Mann-Whitney se utilizó para comparar muestras independientes. De este modo, se pudieron estudiar distintas apreciaciones a lo largo de las fases del estudio, al igual que establecer con mayor solidez la posible efectividad del doblaje didáctico en la mejora de la pronunciación del fonema.

2.3. Instrumentos

Los materiales utilizados en este estudio se centraron en el uso didáctico de clips audiovisuales seleccionados de dos conocidas franquicias del cine fantástico: *Harry Potter* (Columbus 2001; Newell 2005) y *The Hobbit* (Jackson 2013, 2014). Se seleccionaron cuatro fragmentos breves, respetando así las normativas de derechos de autor en la aplicación de material reservado con fines educativos y de investigación. El criterio principal para la selección de dichos clips priorizó la presencia de diversas consonantes problemáticas para estudiantes hispanohablantes de inglés, para poder realizar estudios aislados sobre la efectividad del doblaje didáctico sobre su pronunciación de manera independiente, como, por ejemplo, el fonema /v/ (Baeyens 2023).

Por tanto, los guiones de estos vídeos sirvieron como base tanto para las tareas de doblaje realizadas por el GE como para las grabaciones realizadas por ambos grupos en las fases de pretest y postest. Como puede apreciarse en la Tabla 1, el fonema /ʃ/ aparecía repetidamente a lo largo de los guiones, incluyendo distintas posiciones dentro de la palabra (inicial, media y final) y diferentes correspondencias gráficas (<sh>, <ti>, <ss>, etc.).

Posición inicial de palabra		**Posición medial de palabra**		**Correspondencia gráfica <sh>**		**Correspondencia gráfica <ti>**	
*sh*are	*sh*eep	con*sci*ence	Oaken*sh*ield	*sh*are	*sh*eep	incanta*ti*ons	po*ti*on
*sh*ould	*sh*adows	incanta*ti*ons	reputa*ti*on	*sh*ould	*sh*adows	predisposi*ti*on	atten*ti*on
*sh*adows	*sh*are	po*ti*on	Oaken*sh*ield	*sh*adows	*sh*are	reputa*ti*on	
*sh*ort	*s*ure	predisposit*i*on	Gor*sh*ok's	*sh*ort	fooli*sh*	Otras correspondencias	
Posición final de palabra		posse*ss*ion	fre*sh*water	fle*sh*	Oaken*sh*ield	*s*ure	con*sci*ence
fooli*sh*	fle*sh*	atten*ti*on		Gor*sh*ok's	fre*sh*water	posse*ss*ion	

Tabla 1. Apariciones del fonema /ʃ/ en los guiones de los clips

Como se ha comentado anteriormente, para evaluar la pronunciación del fonema /ʃ/, se consideraron como correctas aquellas producciones que mostraban un punto de articulación postalveolar, diferenciándose así del fonema /s/, principal alternativa producida por estudiantes españoles de inglés.

Finalmente, en lo que respecta a recursos tecnológicos utilizados por los participantes del estudio, en todo momento se pretendió fomentar la autonomía del alumnado, permitiendo al GE elegir libremente las plataformas y aplicaciones para grabar y editar sus doblajes (teléfonos móviles, ordenadores, *tablets*…). No obstante, en un momento previo al desarrollo de los doblajes, se desarrolló una sesión técnica con orientaciones prácticas, donde se ofrecieron consejos y sugerencias para el uso de aplicaciones como *InShot* (Android) o *iMovie* (iOS).

3. Resultados

Para una mejor presentación de los datos recabados, se afrontará el análisis en tres partes principales: en primer lugar, las comparaciones intragrupales (GC y GE por separado), para apreciar posibles diferencias pre y posintervención, para continuar con las comparaciones intergrupales y, por último, la categorización de dichas diferencias potenciales en contextos más específicos, como la correspondencia entre fonema y grafías concretas (<sh> y <ti>) o la situación del fonema a comienzo o final de palabra, así como en posiciones interiores.

3.1. Comparaciones intragrupales

La Tabla 2 refleja el número total de pronunciaciones correctas del fonema /ʃ/ producidas por los participantes en las distintas fases del estudio (pretest, intervención/doblajes y postest), categorizadas por grupo (experimental y control) e individualizadas por participante. Asimismo, se presentan los totales globales y los promedios por participante en cada fase. Por su parte, la Tabla 3, más abajo, muestra los valores de significación estadística (valores *p*) obtenidos a partir de la aplicación del test de Wilcoxon.

GE (n=37)								GC (n=34)					
Particip.	PRE	INT	POS	Particip.	PRE	INT	POS	Particip.	PRE	POS	Particip.	PRE	POS
E01	1	6	1	E23	7	8	10	C01	3	0	C23	0	0
E02	13	17	14	E24	11	7	10	C02	0	2	C24	12	13
E03	5	14	13	E25	2	1	4	C03	2	2	C25	7	10
E04	1	9	9	E26	19	17	19	C04	0	1	C26	8	9
E05	9	8	13	E27	6	5	5	C05	17	19	C27	3	2

GE (n=37)								GC (n=34)					
Particip.	PRE	INT	POS	Particip.	PRE	INT	POS	Particip.	PRE	POS	Particip.	PRE	POS
E06	10	13	15	E28	8	13	12	C06	1	2	C28	6	4
E07	8	16	16	E29	7	4	8	C07	9	8	C29	15	17
E08	4	9	4	E30	8	14	11	C08	5	7	C30	1	8
E09	4	11	8	E31	6	9	10	C09	2	14	C31	6	5
E10	9	17	17	E32	15	16	14	C10	10	15	C32	10	7
E11	5	12	4	E33	4	4	4	C11	0	1	C33	18	14
E12	5	9	9	E34	0	3	3	C12	0	1	C34	0	4
E13	2	4	3	E35	6	15	9	C13	5	2			
E14	0	5	6	E36	0	1	0	C14	7	9			
E15	9	17	12	E37	4	10	7	C15	14	16			
E16	5	4	4					C16	7	6			
E17	4	12	5					C17	11	13			
E18	11	16	18					C18	12	12			
E19	11	11	8		**PRE**	**INT**	**POST**	C19	20	18		**PRE**	**POST**
E20	10	13	14	Total ü	**241**	**364**	**330**	C20	16	18	Total ü	**257**	**296**
E21	11	11	9	Prom.	**6,51**	**9,84**	**8,92**	C21	18	19	Prom.	**7,56**	**8,71**
E22	1	3	2	%	**31,0**	**46,8**	**42,5**	C22	12	18	%	**36,0**	**41,5**

Tabla 2. Total de pronunciaciones correctas del fonema /ʃ/ distribuidas por participantes y fases del estudio

Partiendo de los datos del GC, aunque se percibe una mejora general leve en la tasa de éxito total (de una tasa de éxito del 36% en el pretest a un 41,5% en el postest), con incrementos similares en todas las posiciones estudiadas y correspondencias grafémicas, como se apreciará más adelante, estos aumentos no alcanzaron significación estadística (p > 0,05 en todos los casos; ver Tabla 3), a excepción de la correspondencia con <sh>, donde se observó una diferencia significativa (p = 0,030). En consecuencia, puede afirmarse que no se produjo una mejora estadísticamente significativa en este grupo.

Test de Wilcoxon (Comparaciones intragrupales)	TOTAL /ʃ/	Posición inicial de palabra	Posición media de palabra	Posición final de palabra	<sh>	<ti>
GC Pretest vs GC Postest	0,063	0,061	0,137	0,285	**0,030**	0,415
GE Pretest vs GE Dubbings (Intervención)	**<0,001**	**<0,001**	**<0,001**	**0,037**	**<0,001**	**0,001**
GE Pretest vs GE Postest	**<0,001**	**0,008**	**<0,001**	0,210	**<0,001**	**0,011**

Tabla 3. Valores *p* obtenidos tras aplicar el test de Wilcoxon para comparaciones intragrupales

En los datos del GE, que realizó actividades de doblaje didáctico como parte de la intervención, se apreció una mejora significativa entre el pretest y la pronunciación realizada durante los doblajes, en primer lugar, en todos los parámetros analizados, pasando de un total de 241 pronunciaciones correctas del fonema (tasa de éxito del 31%) a 364 (46,8%), con $p < 0,05$ en todos los contextos estudiados, lo que sugiere un efecto inmediato de la intervención de manera estadísticamente significativa, pudiendo rechazar la hipótesis nula (H_o) en todos los contextos.

Tomando como referencia las comparaciones pretest/postest del GE tras la intervención, se volvieron a registrar mejoras significativas con respecto al pretest (330 pronunciaciones correctas totales; tasa de éxito del 42,5% frente a 241 y 31% del pretest). El patrón de mejora significativa se mantuvo considerando los datos totales ($p < 0,001$) y en la mayoría de subcategorizaciones: en posición inicial ($p = 0,008$), media ($p < 0,001$) y en correspondencias con <sh> ($p < 0,001$) y <ti> ($p = 0,011$), si bien no se alcanza significación cuando el fonema aparece en posición final de palabra ($p = 0,210$).

Estos datos permiten inferir una consolidación de la mejora tras la intervención, especialmente cuando el GC no ofrece, en términos generales, diferencias estadísticamente significativas.

3.2. Comparaciones intergrupales

Tomando como referencia la Tabla 2, presentada en el apartado anterior, en este apartado se ofrece la comparación de datos intergrupales (GE frente a GC), reforzada por los resultados obtenidos tras la aplicación del análisis del test U de Mann-Whitney (Tabla 4).

Test de Mann-Whitney (Comparaciones intergrupales)	TOTAL /ʃ/	Posición inicial de palabra	Posición media de palabra	Posición final de palabra	<sh>	<ti>
GC Pretest vs GE Pretest	0,624	0,456	0,898	0,179	0,567	0,906
GC Postest vs GE Postest	0,721	0,710	0,501	0,309	0,913	0,260

Tabla 4. Valores *p* obtenidos tras aplicar el test de Mann-Whitney para comparaciones intergrupales

La comparación pretest entre el GE y el GC no arrojó diferencias estadísticamente significativas en ninguna de las variables analizadas ($p > 0,05$ en todos los casos), lo que respalda la homogeneidad de ambos grupos antes de la intervención y establece un punto de partida similar en cuanto a la pronunciación del fonema /ʃ/.

En cuanto al postest, aunque el GE mostró una mejora más pronunciada en términos generales tras la intervención, las diferencias con el GC en esta fase del estudio no fueron estadísticamente significativas en ninguna de las dimensiones ($p > 0,05$), lo que podría deberse al tamaño de la muestra, a la variabilidad individual o al periodo limitado de la intervención.

3.3. Análisis del fonema por posición y correspondencia grafémica

3.3.1. *Posición de palabra*

Si subcategorizamos los datos obtenidos acerca de la pronunciación del fonema /ʃ/ en cuanto a la posición en que aparece en las palabras correspondientes (inicial, media o final; ver Tabla 5), y tomando como referencia los estadísticos reflejados en la Tabla 3, los resultados sugieren que la mejora en la pronunciación del fonema tras la aplicación de las actividades de doblaje fue más acusada en posiciones iniciales e intermedias de palabra.

		TOTAL CASOS /ʃ/			POSICIÓN INICIAL		
	Participante	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito
GE (n=37)	**Pretest**	**241**	6,51	31,0%	**107**	2,89	36,1%
	Doblajes	**364**	9,84	46,8%	**152**	4,11	51,4%
	Postest	**330**	8,92	42,5%	**136**	3,68	45,9%
		POSICIÓN MEDIA			**POSICIÓN FINAL**		
	Participante	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito
	Pretest	**122**	3,30	30,0%	**12**	0,32	16,2%
	Doblajes	**189**	5,11	46,4%	**23**	0,62	31,1%
	Postest	**176**	4,76	43,2%	**18**	0,49	24,3%
		TOTAL CASOS /ʃ/			**POSICIÓN INICIAL**		
	Participante	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito
GC (n=34)	**Pretest**	**257**	7,56	36,0%	**117**	3,44	43,0%
	Postest	**296**	8,71	41,5%	**134**	3,94	49,3%
		POSICIÓN MEDIA			**POSICIÓN FINAL**		
	Participante	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito	**TOTAL**	Promedio por participante	Tasa de éxito
	Pretest	**121**	3,56	32,4%	**19**	0,56	27,9%
	Postest	**139**	4,09	37,2%	**23**	0,68	33,8%

Tabla 5. Recuento total de pronunciaciones correctas del fonema y categorización por su posición en la palabra (inicial, media y final)

En el GE, la tasa de éxito en posición inicial pasó del 36,1% (pretest) al 51,4% (doblajes; $p < 0{,}001$ en la comparación entre ambos sets de datos) y se mantuvo en un 45,9% en el postest ($p = 0{,}008$). En posición media, se produjo una evolución similar: del 30,0% inicial al 46,4% durante la intervención, con una consolidación del 43,2% en el postest ($p < 0{,}001$ en ambas comparaciones). En cambio, la mejora en posición final, aunque numéricamente relevante (del 16,2% al 24,3%), no resultó estadísticamente significativa en el postest (p = 0,210). Este patrón sugiere que la producción del fonema /ʃ/ en posición final aparentemente presenta mayores dificultades para los participantes, aunque el número limitado de palabras en la muestra podría suponer otra explicación al respecto.

En cuanto al GC, las diferencias entre el pretest y el postest no alcanzaron significación estadística en ninguna de las posiciones analizadas (p = 0,061 para posición inicial, p = 0,137 para posición media y p = 0,285 para posición final), lo que refuerza la asociación de la mejora de la pronunciación del GE con la intervención con actividades de doblaje didáctico.

3.3.2. *Correspondencia grafémica*

En el estudio de la pronunciación del fonema categorizado por correspondencias grafémicas, se aprecia un comportamiento similar durante todas las fases del estudio entre los datos totales, desarrollados previamente, y las representaciones ortográficas <sh> y <ti> (Tabla 6), las más comunes de la consonante fricativa /ʃ/, aglutinando el 75% del total de palabras del inglés que incluyen dicho fonema (Hanna et al. 1966).

		TOTAL CASOS /ʃ/			<sh>			<ti>		
	Participante	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito
GE (n=37)	**Pretest**	**241**	6,51	31,0%	**128**	3,46	26,6%	**87**	2,35	47,0%
	Doblajes	**364**	9,84	46,8%	**195**	5,27	40,5%	**126**	3,41	68,1%
	Postest	**330**	8,92	42,5%	**185**	5,00	38,5%	**113**	3,05	61,1%

		TOTAL CASOS /ʃ/			<sh>			<ti>		
	Participante	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito	TOTAL	Promedio por particip.	Tasa de éxito
GC (n=34)	**Pretest**	**257**	7,56	36,0%	**144**	4,24	32,6%	**77**	2,26	45,3%
	Postest	**296**	8,71	41,5%	**174**	5,12	39,4%	**85**	2,50	50,0%

Tabla 6. Recuento total de pronunciaciones correctas del fonema y categorización por sus correspondencias gráficas más comunes

En el GE, la tasa de éxito en palabras con <sh>, como *share*, *sheep* o *flesh* aumentó del 26,6% (3,46 pronunciaciones correctas por participante) al 40,5% durante la intervención (5,27 por participante), y se estabilizó en un 38,5% en el postest (5 por participante), con diferencias estadísticamente significativas en ambas comparativas (p < 0,001), según refleja la Tabla 3. Por su parte, las pronunciaciones de palabras con <ti>, aunque partían de un rendimiento más alto en el pretest (47,0%; 2,35 correctas por participante), se incrementaron igualmente hasta un 68,1% (3,41) en la fase de doblajes (p = 0,011 para la comparativa), y se mantuvieron en un 61,1% (3,05) en el postest (p = 0,011), lo que apunta a una mejora pronunciada y estadísticamente significativa en ambas correspondencias grafémicas durante y tras la intervención.

Tomando como referencia el GC, se observó una mejora estadísticamente significativa únicamente en las palabras con la correspondencia <sh> (p = 0,030), aunque de menor magnitud que en el GE. En cambio, las pronunciaciones de <ti> no mostraron diferencias significativas entre el pretest y el postest (p = 0,415), lo que sugiere una evolución más limitada en la adquisición del fonema /ʃ/ en función de esta representación grafémica. Estos datos y resultados apoyan la hipótesis de que las mejoras más sustanciales y consistentes observadas en el grupo experimental están ligadas a la intervención con actividades de doblaje didáctico, como se reflejará en el apartado 4, a continuación.

4. Discusión y conclusiones

El presente estudio presentaba como objetivo principal analizar el impacto de las actividades de doblaje didáctico sobre la producción de la consonante fricativa postalveolar sorda /ʃ/ en estudiantes universitarios españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera. A través de un diseño cuasiexperimental con dos grupos (experimental y control), se extrajeron datos cuantitativos que fueron posteriormente categorizados y analizados mediante la prueba de los rangos con signo de Wilcoxon (para comparaciones intragrupales) y la prueba U de Mann-Whitney (para comparaciones intergrupales) con el fin de observar posibles mejoras en la pronunciación tras la realización de actividades de doblaje didáctico. Los resultados presentados en el apartado 3 permiten extraer diversas conclusiones relevantes desde una perspectiva didáctica y fonética.

Los datos muestran que el GE experimentó una mejora estadísticamente significativa en la producción del fonema /ʃ/ tras la intervención, especialmente en posición inicial y media de palabra, así como en palabras donde el fonema aparecía representado por la grafía <sh>. En contraste, el GC no presentó cambios relevantes, salvo una mejora puntual en la correspondencia grafémica <sh>, lo que sugiere un patrón de evolución propio en el GE atribuible a la intervención didáctica. Estos hallazgos van en consonancia con estudios previos que han documentado los beneficios del doblaje didáctico para el desarrollo de las destrezas orales (Talaván & Costal 2017; Ávila-Cabrera 2022; Tinedo-Rodríguez y Fernández-Costales 2025), al igual que para la pronunciación de otros fonemas igualmente problemáticos para estudiantes españoles de inglés, como la fricativa labiodental sonora /v/ (Baeyens 2023).

A nivel metodológico, el diseño de la intervención se caracterizó por evitar la enseñanza explícita de contenidos fonéticos. A lo largo de las distintas fases (pretest, intervención y postest), no se proporcionaron explicaciones teóricas sobre la articulación del fonema /ʃ/, ni se ofrecieron pautas explícitas para su mejora. Este enfoque puede interpretarse a la luz del concepto de *noticing* (Schmidt 1990), entendido como el proceso mediante el cual los aprendices toman conciencia de determinados rasgos lingüísticos en el input. Aunque el presente estudio no mide de forma directa este constructo, el diseño de la intervención, basado en la repetición, la atención al input audiovisual y la producción sincronizada en actividades de doblaje, pudo haber favorecido procesos de *noticing* fonológico de manera implícita, como anticipaba Sánchez Requena (2018), quien planteaba la hipótesis de que la mejora en pronunciación pudiera alcanzarse sin instrucción fonética directa, pudiendo aplicarse actividades de doblaje didáctico que favorecieran su competencia fonológica de manera incidental. En este sentido, la mejora observada en la producción del fonema /ʃ/ podría estar relacionada con un aumento de la atención selectiva hacia este rasgo fonético, incluso en ausencia de instrucción explícita.

En este sentido, las actividades de doblaje didáctico se perfilan como herramientas de gran potencial pedagógico, capaces de promover mejoras en la pronunciación a través de metodologías activas, motivadoras e innovadoras. Esta afirmación se ve reforzada por otras investigaciones que han documentado el impacto positivo del doblaje en entornos educativos diversos (Chiu 2012; He & Wasuntarasophit 2015; Talaván y Costal 2017; Fernández-Costales 2021). En todos estos trabajos, no solo se destaca su valor motivador, sino también su potencial como instrumento para fomentar la producción oral y fortalecer la autonomía del aprendizaje. Sin embargo, la mayoría de estos estudios se centran en la mejora general de las destrezas orales o la fluidez, pero no específicamente en fonética segmental. En este caso, se explora por primera vez de forma sistemática el potencial del doblaje didáctico como herramienta para mejorar el fonema /ʃ/, designado como problemático para estudiantes españoles de inglés (Kenworthy 1987; Walker 2010; Rogerson-Revell 2011). Esta focalización lo convierte en una aportación original dentro del ámbito de la TAD.

Profundizando en los detalles de los resultados obtenidos y analizados, resulta relevante remarcar que el efecto de la intervención fue más visible en palabras donde /ʃ/ aparecía al inicio o en posición media de palabra, mientras que la mejora en posición final no alcanzó significación estadística en el postest del GE. Este patrón sugiere que la producción del fonema en dicha posición podría requerir de un enfoque más explícito o una mayor exposición durante la intervención. Por otro lado, el número de apariciones de /ʃ/ en posición final dentro de las palabras que debían pronunciar los participantes resultó muy limitado (únicamente dos palabras: *foolish* y *flesh*), lo cual reduce la posibilidad de extrapolar resultados significativos y representa una limitación metodológica del estudio.

En lo que respecta a la correspondencia grafémica, se observó una evolución positiva más acusada en la pronunciación de la grafía <sh>, a pesar de partir de una tasa de éxito más baja en el pretest, lo que sugiere una posible correlación entre la práctica auditiva-visual intensiva de esas palabras durante la actividad de doblaje y la mejora en su producción. El caso de <ti> mostró también una mejora estadísticamente significativa en el GE (no así en el GC), aunque el margen de mejora fue menor. Estos resultados refuerzan la idea de que la ortografía influye en la adquisición fonológica, particularmente en estudiantes cuya L1 establece correspondencias fonema-grafema más sistemáticas, como es el caso del español/castellano.

Pese a los resultados positivos obtenidos, cabe señalar que el análisis intergrupal mediante la prueba de Mann-Whitney no reveló diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre el GE y el GC tras la intervención. Este hallazgo, aunque pudiera parecer contradictorio, no invalida los efectos observados dentro del GE, sino que obliga a una interpretación matizada. La ausencia de diferencias significativas podría explicarse, al menos en parte, por varios factores: una duración reducida de la intervención, una posible variabilidad intraindividual elevada, o una muestra que, aunque adecuada según Cohen et al. (2007), podría requerir de un tamaño mayor para extrapolar conclusiones más claras al respecto.

Desde una perspectiva metodológica, el estudio presenta ciertas limitaciones que deben ser reconocidas. En primer lugar, la muestra se compuso exclusivamente de estudiantes universitarios de nivel intermedio de inglés, todos ellos procedentes de una misma región española, lo que restringe la generalización de los resultados a otras poblaciones o niveles competenciales. Además, la intervención se limitó a un único tipo de actividad de traducción audiovisual (doblaje intralingüístico literal), lo que impide establecer comparaciones con otros formatos potencialmente eficaces, como la aplicación didáctica del doblaje creativo (Ávila-Cabrera 2022), la audiodescripción o las voces superpuestas (*voice-over*) (Talaván et al. 2025). Asimismo, la edad homogénea de los participantes (18-19 años) podría constituir una variable limitante, ya que la sensibilidad fonológica y la capacidad de automatización articulatoria varían notablemente a lo largo del desarrollo cognitivo. En segundo lugar, debe señalarse que los grupos experimental y de control pertenecían a distintas cohortes académicas (2019-2020 y 2020-2021), lo que puede haber introducido posibles efectos de cohorte (por ejemplo, diferencias contextuales o instruccionales entre cursos académicos) que no pudieron ser completamente controlados. Aunque se verificó la comparabilidad inicial mediante pruebas de nivel y análisis estadísticos, esta circunstancia limita la plena equivalencia entre grupos. En tercer lugar, la evaluación de la producción fonética fue realizada por un único investigador, por lo que la fiabilidad reportada corresponde a un análisis intra-evaluador y no inter-evaluador. Si bien el valor obtenido en la kappa de Cohen (κ = 0,839) indica un nivel de concordancia casi perfecto y aporta solidez al procedimiento de codificación, la ausencia de un segundo evaluador externo constituye una limitación adicional. En conjunto, aunque los resultados obtenidos muestran consistencia interna y respaldo estadístico (reforzado por los valores de significación reportados), deben ser interpretados con la debida cautela a la luz de las limitaciones señaladas. Estas consideraciones abren la puerta a futuras investigaciones que amplíen la muestra, incorporen múltiples evaluadores y/o comparen distintos enfoques de traducción audiovisual en el desarrollo de la competencia fonológica.

A pesar de las limitaciones mencionadas, sin embargo, la relevancia y carácter innovador de este estudio lo distinguen dentro del panorama de la investigación en didáctica de lenguas extranjeras. En primer lugar, se centra en el análisis de un fonema (la fricativa postalveolar sorda /ʃ/) escasamente abordado desde una perspectiva empírica cuantitativa en el contexto de procesos de enseñanza/aprendizaje de EFL, a pesar de su relevancia para la inteligibilidad (Jenkins 2000). En segundo lugar, la aplicación del doblaje didáctico como estrategia metodológica representa una novedad en el estudio de la fonética segmental, dado que, a diferencia de otros enfoques centrados en la instrucción explícita, este estudio se basa exclusivamente en el aprendizaje incidental, sin intervención docente directa ni explicaciones fonéticas formales. La actividad de doblaje se presenta, por tanto, como un vehículo eficaz para favorecer la toma de conciencia fonológica (*noticing*) en tareas auténticas de producción oral. Además, la investigación se apoya en un tratamiento riguroso de los datos, lo que permite establecer relaciones significativas entre la intervención y los resultados obtenidos, algo todavía poco habitual en el ámbito de la fonética aplicada a contextos educativos reales. Finalmente, este trabajo combina el uso de tecnología accesible, como herramientas de edición audiovisual, con objetivos de mejora de la competencia fonológica, y propone implicaciones pedagógicas claras, prácticas y transferibles a diferentes niveles educativos. En conjunto, estos elementos refuerzan el valor pionero del estudio y contribuyen al avance de enfoques pedagógicos alternativos para la enseñanza de la pronunciación en entornos de EFL.

A la luz de estos aspectos, se abren múltiples vías para futuras investigaciones. Resultaría de particular interés replicar el estudio en otros niveles educativos, como Educación Primaria (Fernández-Costales 2021), Secundaria (Sánchez Requena 2016, 2018) u otros ciclos universitarios (Talaván y Costal 2017), así como incluir estudiantes de inglés de diferentes zonas geográficas (Chiu 2012) o con matices fonéticos distintos al castellano estándar. La comparación entre distintas modalidades de TAD, o mejor aún, la combinación de modalidades también constituiría una línea de investigación prometedora. Por otro lado, la inclusión de grupos experimentales con intervenciones más prolongadas o segmentadas podría ayudar a determinar con mayor precisión los efectos de la exposición reiterada al input audiovisual modificado por el propio estudiante, así como su efecto a largo plazo en la producción fonológica. Asimismo, sería relevante comprobar la eficacia del doblaje didáctico en el desarrollo de otros rasgos fonológicos relevantes para los estudiantes hispanohablantes de inglés, tales como la producción de longitud vocálica, otros fonemas consonánticos problemáticos o diversos aspectos suprasegmentales (ritmo, entonación, etc.), elementos que resultan cruciales para la inteligibilidad en la comunicación oral. Además, resultaría pertinente extender este tipo de estudios a estudiantes de inglés con otras lenguas maternas, con el fin de analizar si el impacto del doblaje didáctico varía en función del repertorio fonológico de la L1 y de los patrones de transferencia fonética. Este enfoque contrastivo permitiría afinar aún más las aplicaciones didácticas de la técnica, adaptándola a diferentes perfiles de estudiantes y contextos educativos.

En definitiva, los resultados de este trabajo confirman que las actividades de doblaje intralingüístico didáctico, aplicadas en contextos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, pueden ser herramientas altamente eficaces para mejorar la pronunciación de fonemas problemáticos, incluso sin instrucción explícita. Lejos de tratarse de una técnica marginal o anecdótica, debería consolidarse como una estrategia didáctica de primer orden, no solo por su valor motivador, sino por su capacidad de incidir en dimensiones clave del aprendizaje lingüístico, como la inteligibilidad y la precisión articulatoria.

Como conclusión general, puede afirmarse que el doblaje intralingüístico didáctico representa una alternativa metodológica con gran potencial para el desarrollo de la pronunciación en entornos de EFL. Su combinación de *input* auditivo, producción oral, y autoevaluación promueve procesos cognitivos y metacognitivos esenciales para la mejora de la competencia fonológica. Aunque se requieren más estudios para validar y ampliar estos hallazgos, los datos aquí presentados constituyen un paso firme hacia la integración de la competencia fonológica en las prácticas de enseñanza de lenguas, desde una perspectiva activa, motivadora y centrada en el aprendizaje significativo.

5. Obras citadas

Afonso, Elena. 2021. "The Importance of Teaching English Pronunciation in Spanish Schools". Trabajo Fin de Máster. Universidad de La Laguna.

Ávila-Cabrera, José Javier. 2022. "Improving Oral Production Skills in the Business English Class through Creative Dubbing". *ESP Today. Journal of English for Specific Purposes at Tertiary Level* 10 (1): 99-122. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2022.10.1.5>.

Baeyens, Lucas. 2023. "Improving the Pronunciation of Problematic /v/ in Spanish Learners of English Using Intralingual Dubbing Activities". En Castro, Elke (coord.) *Interrelaciones entre la imagen, el texto y las tecnologías digitales. Nuevas perspectivas en la enseñanza de las ciencias sociales*. Dykinson: 1158-1182.

Baeyens, Lucas. 2024. "Students' Perceptions Related to the Value of Intralingual Dubbing Activities as a Motivational Tool for the Enhancement of Oral Skills in EFL Learning". *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 7 (1): 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v7i1.2024.293>.

Burston, Jack. 2005. "Video Dubbing Projects in the Foreign Language Curriculum". *CALICO Journal* 23: 79-92. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v23i1.79-92>.

Chiu, Yi-Hui. 2012. "Can Film Dubbing Projects Facilitate EFL Learners' Acquisition of English Pronunciation?". *British Journal of Educational Technology* 43(1): 24-27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2011.01252.x>.

Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion y Keith Morrison. 2007. *Research Methods in Education.* 6th Edition. Routledge.

Columbus, Chris. 2001. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Warner Bros Pictures/Heyday Films/1492 Pictures.

Derwing, Tracey. M. y Murray J. Munro. 2015. *Pronunciation Fundamentals: Evidence-based Perspectives for L2 Teaching and Research.* John Benjamins.

Eberhard, David. M., Gary Francis Simons y Charles D. Fennig. (eds.) 2024. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World. 27th edition.* SIL International.

Eberhard, David. M., Gary Francis Simons y Charles D. Fennig. (eds.) 2025. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World. 28th edition.* SIL International.

Fernández-Costales, Alberto. 2021. "Subtitling and Dubbing as Teaching Resources in CLIL in Primary Education: The Teachers' Perspective". *Porta Linguarum* 36: 175-192. <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.v0i36.16228>.

Hanna, Paul Robert, Jean S. Hanna, Richard E. Hodges y Edwin H. Rudorf. 1966. *Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondences as Cues to Spelling Improvement.* United States Government Printing Office.

He, Pin y Sukhum Wasuntarasophit. 2015. "The Effects of Video Dubbing Tasks on Reinforcing Oral Proficiency for Chinese Vocational College Students". *Asian EFL Journal* 17 (2): 106-133.

Jackson, Peter. 2013. *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. Wingnut Films/New Line Cinema/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)/Warner Bros Pictures.

Jackson, Peter. 2014. *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies.* Wingnut Films/New Line Cinema/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)/Warner Bros Pictures.

Jenkins, Jennifer. 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford U.P.

Jones, Rodney H. 1997. "Beyond 'Listen and Repeat': Pronunciation Teaching Materials and Theories of Second Language Acquisition". *System* 25: 103-112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(96)00064-4>.

Kenworthy, Joanne. 1987. *Teaching English Pronunciation*. Longman.

Munro, Murray J. y Tracy M. Derwing. 1995. "Foreign Accent, Comprehensibility, and Intelligibility in the Speech of Second Language Learners". *Language Learning* 45: 73-97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1995.tb00963.x>.

Newell, Michael. 2005. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Warner Bros Pictures/Heyday Films.

Rogerson-Revell, Pamela. 2011. *English Phonology and Pronunciation Teaching*. Bloomsbury.

Sánchez Requena, Alicia. 2016. Audiovisual Translation in Teaching Foreign Languages: Contributions of Dubbing to Improve Fluency and Pronunciation in Spontaneous Conversations. *Porta Linguarum* 26: 9-21. <http://hdl.handle.net/10481/53920>.

Sánchez-Requena, Alicia. 2018. "Intralingual Dubbing as a Tool for Developing Speaking Skills. Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts". *Audiovisual Translation in Applied Linguistics: Educational Perspectives* 4 (1): 101-128. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ttmc.00006.san>.

Schmidt, Richard W. 1990. "The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning". *Applied Linguistics* 11 (2): 129-158. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/11.2.129>.

Silva Valencia, Juan Carlos. 2022. "A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of English and Spanish Phonological System". *GIST Education and Learning Research Journal* 25: 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.1152>.

Subiabre Ubilla, Paulina B. 2020. "La adquisición de segmentos del inglés desde la sociolingüística: la fricativa postalveolar sorda /ʃ/". *Literatura y Lingüística* 41: 383-412. <https://doi.org/10.29344/0717621X.41.2255>.

Talaván, Noa y José Javier Ávila-Cabrera. 2015. "First Insights into the Combination of Dubbing and Subtitling as L2 Didactic Tools". En Gambier, Yves, Annamaria Caimi y Cristina Mariotti (eds.) *Subtitles and Language Learning.* Peter Lang: 149-172.

Talaván, Noa y Tomás Costal. 2017. "iDub — The Potential of Intralingual Dubbing in Foreign Language Learning: How to Assess the Task". *Language Value* 9 (1): 62-88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6035/LanguageV.2017.9.4>.

Talaván, Noa, Jennifer Lertola y Alberto Fernández-Costales. 2024. *Didactic Audiovisual Translation and Foreign Language Education*. Routledge.

Tinedo-Rodríguez, Antonio-Jesús, y Alberto Fernández-Costales. 2025. "La Traducción Audiovisual Didáctica (TAD) como recurso en la formación del profesorado: un estudio de caso". *Didáctica. Lengua y Literatura, 37*: 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.5209/dill.90591>.

Tlazalo, Ana Cristina y Nora M. Basurto. 2014. "Pronunciation Instruction and Students' Practice to Develop their Confidence in EFL Oral Skills". *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development* 16 (2): 151-170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v16n2.46146>.

Uribe-Enciso, Olga Lucía, Sol Smith Fuentes Hernández, Karla Lizeth Vargas Pita y Anderson Steve Rey Pabón. 2019. "Problematic Phonemes for Spanish-speakers' Learners of English". *GIST — Education and Learning Research Journal* 19: 215-238. <https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.701>.

Walker, Robin. 2010. *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford U.P.

Zhang, Hanwen. 2023. "A Comparison Analysis of Spanish Phonological System and English Phonological System". *Communications in Humanities Research* 21: 97-103. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/21/20231430>.

Recibido: 28/01/2026
Aceptado: 21/03/2026

CULTURAL MILKSCAPE: A CORPUS-BASED CROSS-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF BREASTFEEDING DISCOURSES IN ITALIAN AND ANGLOPHONE NEWS

PAISAJE CULTURAL DE LA LACTANCIA: UN ANÁLISIS BASADO EN CORPUS Y DE ENFOQUE CONTRASTIVO DE LOS DISCURSOS SOBRE LA LACTANCIA MATERNA EN LA PRENSA ITALIANA Y ANGLÓFONA

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202612923

FABIO CANGERO
University of Naples Federico II, Italy
fabio.cangero@unina.it
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0974-9742

Abstract

Applying corpus-assisted cross-linguistic discourse analysis, this article investigates how breastfeeding is discursively constructed in contemporary Italian and Anglophone news media. Two comparable news corpora, each consisting of 100 newspaper articles published between 2021 and 2023, were compiled from the Nexis Uni database. The study combines corpus-based discourse analysis with the appraisal framework to examine how breastfeeding is represented, evaluated and legitimised in media discourse. Frequency analysis and concordance examination of both datasets reveal that infant feeding is overwhelmingly framed as a maternal responsibility, with mothers emerging as the central social actors while fathers remain largely marginalised. Across the two corpora, breastfeeding is consistently represented as the optimal and morally desirable method of infant feeding, often supported through references to scientific authority that function to reinforce normative assumptions about maternal responsibility. While these similarities are evident, the analysis also points to certain cross-linguistic differences in how breastfeeding is discursively framed. In the Italian data, greater emphasis is placed on supportive infrastructures and institutional initiatives that enable breastfeeding in everyday contexts. By contrast, the English-language corpus more often presents breastfeeding in terms of individual challenge, personal responsibility and public health advocacy. Taken together, these patterns suggest that media discourse plays a role in shaping expectations around motherhood, positioning breastfeeding not only as a health recommendation but also as a marker of what counts as appropriate maternal behaviour.

Keywords: breastfeeding discourse, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, appraisal, motherhood, media representation.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga cómo se construye discursivamente la lactancia materna en los medios de comunicación italianos y anglófonos contemporáneos mediante un análisis comparado de corpus. Dos corpus periodísticos comparables, cada uno compuesto por 100 artículos publicados entre 2021 y 2023, fueron compilados a partir de la base de datos Nexis Uni. El estudio combina el Análisis del Discurso Basado en Corpus con la Teoría de la Valoración para examinar cómo la lactancia materna es representada, evaluada y legitimada en el discurso mediático. El análisis de frecuencias y de concordancias revela que la alimentación infantil se presenta predominantemente como una responsabilidad materna en ambos corpus, donde las madres emergen como los actores sociales centrales mientras que los padres permanecen en gran medida marginados. En los dos conjuntos de datos, la lactancia materna se representa de forma sistemática como el método óptimo y moralmente deseable de alimentación infantil, a menudo respaldado por referencias a la autoridad científica que refuerzan supuestos normativos sobre la responsabilidad materna. A pesar de estas similitudes, el análisis también pone de relieve diferencias translingüísticas en el énfasis discursivo. El discurso mediático italiano tiende a destacar infraestructuras de apoyo e iniciativas institucionales destinadas a facilitar la lactancia, mientras que la prensa anglófona la enmarca con mayor frecuencia a través de narrativas de desafío individual, responsabilidad personal y promoción de la salud pública. Los resultados muestran cómo el discurso mediático contribuye a la moralización de la maternidad al construir la lactancia materna no solo como una recomendación sanitaria, sino también como un referente normativo de la "buena maternidad".

Palabras clave: lactancia materna, análisis del discurso asistido por corpus, valoración (appraisal), maternidad, representación mediática.

1. Introduction

Mothers are increasingly positioned as 'risk managers' responsible for safeguarding their children's health and wellbeing (Furedi 2002; Reese 2005; Lee 2008). This expectation reflects the broader logic of contemporary risk-conscious societies, where individuals are encouraged to anticipate and minimise potential dangers associated with everyday decisions (Beck 1992; Slovic 2000). Within this framework, parenting practices are increasingly guided by expert knowledge and public health recommendations that frame certain behaviours as responsible or desirable (Knaak 2005).

Many of these expectations emerge at the very beginning of motherhood. Decisions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, such as the choice between vaginal birth and caesarean section, are often subjected to social scrutiny and moral judgement that may shape women's self-perception as mothers (Lobel and DeLuca 2007). Infant feeding practices represent another domain in which such expectations become particularly visible. Over the past decades, breastfeeding has increasingly been framed in public health discourse as the "cultural and biological norm" for infant feeding (Alberta Breastfeeding Committee 2009).

A range of organisations have actively promoted breastfeeding as the preferred method of infant feeding, including La Leche League International, the International Lactation Consultant Association, Breastfeeding USA, the Global Breastfeeding Collective and the National Breastfeeding Coalition. While these initiatives are often grounded in legitimate concerns about infant health, scholars have noted that pro-breastfeeding advocacy may sometimes adopt a persuasive rather than purely informational tone. Knaak (2005), for instance, argues that dominant infant-feeding discourse frequently functions as a vehicle of persuasion, characterised by informational biases, moral overtones and a restricted representation of choice.

Several studies have explored how breastfeeding discourse has shifted beyond purely medical considerations towards broader moral and cultural meanings. Researchers such as Kukla (2006), Avishai (2007), Wolf (2007) and Lee and Bristow (2009) observe that breastfeeding has increasingly become intertwined with normative expectations surrounding responsible motherhood. In this context, breastfeeding can come to operate as a symbolic marker of 'good motherhood', while women who do not breastfeed may be more likely to encounter judgement, stigma or feelings of inadequacy. As Petersen and Lupton (2000) contend, public health discourse often relies on moralised binaries that position some behaviours as responsible and others as problematic, in this way reinforcing normative expectations around health practices.

Within this discursive framework, breastfeeding may shape maternal identity and influence both social perceptions and self-evaluation. Women who successfully breastfeed may experience it as confirmation of maternal competence, whereas those who cannot or choose not to breastfeed may face feelings of guilt or self-blame. Such pressures may be particularly acute for women who encounter medical or structural barriers to breastfeeding. These include conditions such as HIV infection, complications affecting milk supply, mastitis or nipple pain, the use of medications incompatible with breastfeeding and workplace environments that provide limited opportunities for breastfeeding. Psychological factors such as stress, anxiety and postpartum depression may further complicate the experience of infant feeding.

Drawing on interviews with breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding mothers, Andrews and Knaak (2013) describe this phenomenon as a "culture of pressure" (2013: 88). Many participants in their study reported feeling expected to breastfeed and experiencing stigma when deviating from this norm. According to the authors, this pressure operates along multiple social axes. It can come from partners, relatives or employers who encourage breastfeeding, but also from peer networks in which women monitor and evaluate one another's parenting practices.

Although these expectations are frequently encountered in everyday interactions, they are also tied to broader cultural narratives around motherhood and infant care. Media discourse plays a role in circulating and reinforcing these narratives, shaping how particular parenting practices are represented and evaluated in the public sphere. From a linguistic perspective, media representations of social practices have increasingly been examined through corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Studies in corpus-assisted discourse analysis demonstrate how recurring lexical patterns in media texts contribute to the construction of social norms, ideological framings and behavioural expectations (Partington et al. 2013; Baker and Levon 2015). Research on health communication further shows that journalistic discourse frequently employs evaluative language, expert authority and moral framing to present particular behaviours as responsible or desirable (Crawford 2006; Brookes et al. 2022; Al Fajri et al. 2023).

In media discourse studies, scholars have also examined how parenting practices and family roles are linguistically constructed through recurring narratives and evaluative patterns that reinforce culturally dominant models of motherhood (Heffernan and Wilgus 2020; Zottola et al. 2024; Mary et al. 2025). Breastfeeding represents a particularly revealing site of analysis because it sits at the intersection of several overlapping discourses, including public health, parenting norms and gender expectations.

Against this background, the present study examines how breastfeeding is discursively constructed in Italian and English-language newspaper discourse. It focuses in particular on the linguistic patterns through which breastfeeding is represented, evaluated and legitimised in contemporary news media. By combining corpus-based approaches with qualitative discourse analysis, the study explores how these representations contribute to shaping normative expectations around motherhood and infant feeding.

To address these issues, the study adopts a corpus-assisted approach that allows for systematic comparison of two comparable news corpora compiled from Italian and English-language newspapers. Through frequency analysis and concordance examination, it identifies recurring lexical patterns and discursive strategies used to frame breastfeeding practices. This cross-linguistic perspective makes it possible to trace both similarities and differences in how breastfeeding is represented across the two media contexts, offering insight into the role of media discourse in shaping contemporary understandings of motherhood and infant care.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Corpus Collection

The Italian and English-language corpora were compiled using Nexis Uni, an academic database providing access to professional and media sources. The dataset consists exclusively of newspaper articles published between 9 November 2021 and 9 November 2023, a period selected to capture recent debates on breastfeeding and parenting practices in the post-pandemic context, when issues related to maternal care, work-life balance and public breastfeeding gained renewed visibility. Limiting the corpus to this time frame made it possible to work with a stable and closed dataset, supporting more consistent cross-linguistic comparison.

Two comparable corpora were compiled, one for each language. The Allattamento corpus consists of 100 Italian newspaper articles selected from a larger dataset retrieved through keyword searches (i.e. *allattamento*). The Breastfeeding corpus was compiled following the same criteria and includes 100 English-language newspaper articles published within the same time span, retrieved through keyword searches (i.e. *breastfeeding*). For both corpora, articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic following an initial keyword-based retrieval and subsequent manual screening, rather than random sampling. In qualitative discourse-oriented research, corpus size is often determined by the principle of data saturation (Guest et al. 2006; Sim et al. 2018), that is, the point at which additional texts no longer introduce substantially new themes or linguistic patterns. Preliminary screening indicated that recurring narratives and lexical patterns stabilised within this range of texts, making 100 articles an appropriate size for qualitative corpus-assisted analysis. Using the same number of texts in each corpus helps ensure comparability between the two datasets while providing a sufficiently broad sample of media discourse. The English corpus comprises 73,245 tokens (62,473 word types).

The Italian corpus draws on articles from major national and regional outlets, including *Corriere della Sera*, *La Nazione* and ANSA. These sources were chosen because they target a broad, non-specialist readership and thus reflect how breastfeeding is discussed in the public sphere, rather than within specialised medical communication. The English-language corpus, by contrast, includes articles from newspapers across a range of anglophone contexts, such as *Daily News* (South Africa), *Kerryman* (Ireland), *Newry Democrat* and *The Sun* (Nigeria). This broader geographical spread reflects the aim of the study, which is not to compare two equivalent national press systems, but to examine how breastfeeding discourse is constructed across two distinct linguistic media spaces, one nationally bounded (Italy) and one transnational (anglophone media).

The composition of the corpora follows the distribution of texts retrieved through the search process rather than a pre-defined balance of political orientations. While editorial differences may shape how issues are framed, a systematic analysis of ideological variation would require a larger dataset with a different design. At the same time, the relatively contained size of the corpora made it possible to read all texts closely, supporting qualitative interpretation alongside corpus-assisted analysis (Baker 2023).

2.2. Methodology

To investigate the discursive representation of breastfeeding in Italian and English-language news media, this study adopts a corpus-assisted discourse-analytical approach combining quantitative corpus methods with qualitative interpretation. Particular attention was paid to the semantic scope of the search terms used to compile the corpora. While the English term *breastfeeding* refers specifically to feeding an infant with breast milk, the Italian term *allattamento* functions as a broader hypernym encompassing a wider range of infant-feeding practices, including breastfeeding and formula feeding. Consequently, the Italian search term potentially captures a wider semantic field than its English counterpart. This difference was considered when interpreting lexical patterns emerging from the two corpora.

Methodologically, the two datasets should be considered comparable rather than equivalent corpora. They were designed to be comparable in terms of genre (newspaper discourse), time period and thematic focus on infant feeding and parenting. However, the corpora are not perfectly symmetrical. As discussed above, *allattamento* encompasses a broader semantic range than *breastfeeding*, and the English-language corpus includes newspapers from different anglophone contexts rather than a single national press system. The findings should therefore be interpreted as discursive tendencies observable across two linguistic media environments rather than as strict one-to-one contrasts.

The corpora were analysed using Sketch Engine, a corpus analysis platform that provides tools such as frequency lists, concordances and collocation analysis (Kilgarriff et al. 2014). Articles were formatted as individual documents prior to upload in order to create a clean textual dataset suitable for analysis. The texts were combined into a single dataset for each language and analysed as a whole without the use of metadata variables (i.e. newspaper source or publication date), as the study focuses on the overall discursive construction of breastfeeding in mainstream news discourse rather than differences between specific outlets.

Two complementary analytical procedures were employed. First, frequency analysis was conducted to identify the most recurrent lexical items associated with breastfeeding in each corpus. Particular attention was paid to word classes relevant for discourse analysis, including nouns referring to social actors, verbs describing actions or processes and evaluative adjectives expressing stance or judgement. These items were identified through frequency lists and subsequently examined in relation to their discursive functions.

Second, concordance analysis was used to examine these frequent lexical items in their immediate textual contexts. This qualitative step enabled closer examination of how statistically prominent items function in discourse and how evaluative meanings are constructed in the texts.

The analysis is grounded in Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis (Baker 2014; Baker and McEnery 2015; Egbert and Baker 2019; Egbert et al. 2020), which combines corpus-linguistic techniques with discourse analysis to investigate how recurring linguistic patterns contribute to the construction of social meanings. This approach enables systematic exploration of lexical patterns while also allowing qualitative interpretation of the discursive implications of these patterns.

The study also draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics Appraisal Framework (Martin and White 2005) to interpret evaluative language in the corpus. Rather than applying full manual annotation, the framework was used as an interpretative model to analyse evaluative meanings emerging from concordance analysis. Particular attention was paid to the Attitude subsystem (Affect, Judgement and Appreciation), which captures different forms of evaluation in discourse, and to the Engagement subsystem, which examines how speakers position their statements in relation to alternative viewpoints. In particular, the analysis considers instances of *dialogic contraction*, whereby propositions are presented as authoritative or difficult to contest. In analysing Appreciation, the study also draws on Lee's (2015) extension of the Valuation subsystem, distinguishing between Sociality, Maintenance, Salience and Validity values in order to provide a more fine-grained interpretation of evaluative meanings.

In addition to evaluative language, the analysis also considers broader strategies of discursive legitimation. Drawing on Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, the study examines processes such as moral evaluation, naturalisation and mythopoesis, which contribute to legitimising social practices by presenting them as morally desirable or culturally natural. Finally, the interpretation draws on the concepts of interdiscursivity (Pêcheux 1983; Fairclough 1992) and heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) to account for the interaction of multiple discourses within media texts.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Analysis of the Allattamento Corpus

A preliminary noun frequency analysis of the Allattamento corpus shows that words such as "mamma" [*mother/mum*] (r. freq.: 163; n. freq.: 2.33) and "donna" [*woman*] (r. freq.: 132; n. freq.: 1.89) appear among the most frequent nouns in the dataset (see Table 1).

Noun	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency per 1,000 words
Allattamento	240	3.43
Bambino	177	2.53
Mamma	163	2.33
Anno	150	2.14
Donna	132	1.89

Table 1. Top 5 nouns in the Allattamento corpus by raw frequency and normalised frequency per 1,000 words

Although this pattern may initially appear unsurprising, closer examination reveals a relevant aspect of how infant-feeding practices are discursively represented in the Italian press. The prominence of "mamma" [*mother/mum*] and "donna" [*woman*] indicates a strong emphasis on the maternal and feminine dimensions of infant feeding. By contrast, references to fathers remain relatively marginal: the term "papà" [*father/dad*] occurs only 18 times (n. freq.: 0.36).

This lexical asymmetry may be interpreted as an instance of naturalisation (Van Leeuwen 2007), whereby infant feeding is discursively represented as a self-evidently maternal domain. In this respect, the corpus does not simply foreground mothers as central social actors but also constructs breastfeeding —and infant feeding more broadly— as cultural practices belonging primarily to women. This maternal framing is particularly significant in the Italian context, where parenthood remains shaped by restrictive legal and political discourses around family formation. Against this background, the corpus suggests that fathers remain largely absent from discussions of infant feeding and early caregiving, which are overwhelmingly attributed to mothers.

Use of the concordance tool made it possible to examine the contexts in which "mamma" [*mother/mum*] and "donna" [*woman*] occur in the corpus. The concordance lines reveal recurring discursive patterns in which mothers are portrayed as subjects requiring comfort, protection and institutional support in order to breastfeed successfully:

(1) Da ieri infatti il Vittoriale ha il Baby Pit Stop Unicef, *ambiente protetto* dove le mamme possono allattare *a proprio agio*. (Since yesterday the Vittoriale has hosted a UNICEF Baby Pit Stop, a *protected environment* where mothers can breastfeed *comfortably*)

(2) […] ma è fondamentale mettere le mamme in condizione di allattare serenamente. (it is essential to create conditions that allow mothers to breastfeed serenely)

(3) […] assicurare un ambiente che *consenta* alle madri che allattano e che lavorano di conciliare queste due attività (ensuring an environment that *allows* breastfeeding mothers who work to reconcile these two activities)

(4) Il focus della Settimana è infatti sul delicato equilibrio tra allattamento e occupazione lavorativa affinché tutta la comunità contribuisca a *sostenere* le mamme […] (The focus of the week is the delicate balance between breastfeeding and employment, so that the whole community can contribute to *supporting* mothers)

These concordance lines reveal several recurring lexical patterns. First, process-enabling expressions such as "mettere in condizione" [*create the conditions for*], "mettere a proprio agio" [*put someone at ease*] and "consentire" [*allow/enable*] frame breastfeeding as a practice that depends on supportive conditions. Second, verbs such as "aiutare" [*help*] and "sostenere" [*support*] construe processes that position institutional actors as enabling agents in breastfeeding practices. In Halliday's (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014) terms, these verbs can be interpreted as material processes, since they describe actions aimed at enabling or facilitating breastfeeding.

A third pattern concerns evaluative constructions expressing normative necessity, such as "è fondamentale" [*it is essential*]. These constructions present the creation of breastfeeding-friendly environments as something socially necessary. Similarly, adjectival and adverbial expressions related to comfort and protection like "spazio confortevole" [*comfortable space*], "ambiente protetto" [*protected environment*], "a proprio agio" [*at ease*] and "serenamente" [*serenely*] further contribute to this supportive discursive framing.

Collectively, these patterns suggest that breastfeeding is not simply represented as a natural maternal act, but as a practice that often relies on favourable social and institutional conditions. This introduces an interesting discursive tension. On the one hand, breastfeeding is frequently legitimised through processes of naturalisation (Van Leeuwen 2007), appearing as the expected or normative way of feeding an infant. On the other hand, the linguistic patterns observed in the corpus simultaneously imply that breastfeeding may be difficult to enact in practice and therefore requires forms of institutional, social and interpersonal support.

This interpretation ties in with previous research on women's experiences of breastfeeding in public settings. For example, Hauck et al (2021) show that discomfort may stem from social surveillance, unsolicited advice, stigma, fear of conflict or awkward encounters with strangers. In this light, the emphasis on comfort, protection and reassurance in the corpus can be read not only as supportive, but also as an implicit recognition of the social difficulties breastfeeding mothers may face.

Example (4) warrants particular attention, as it highlights a structural issue affecting an increasing number of mothers: the difficulty of reconciling breastfeeding practices with employment responsibilities. In Italy, maternity protection is regulated by Legislative Decree No. 151 of 26 March 2001, which provides five months of leave distributed between the pre- and post-partum periods. Although this period can be extended on a voluntary basis, such extensions are not mandatory and may come with reduced pay. When these provisions are considered alongside public health recommendations, a clear tension becomes apparent. Guidelines issued by the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the European Union, and endorsed by the Italian Ministry of Health, recommend continuing breastfeeding for up to two years or beyond, depending on the preferences of both mother and child.

In practice, this creates difficulties for many working mothers, who may struggle to balance professional commitments with breastfeeding. Following these recommendations would likely require forms of maternity protection that extend beyond the period currently guaranteed by law. Against this backdrop, the prominence of verbs such as "aiutare" [*help*] (r. f. = 34; n. f. = 679.46) and "sostenere" [*support*] (r. f. = 31; n. f. = 619.5) in the corpus can be read as reflecting the broader structural constraints faced by mothers trying to combine breastfeeding with employment.

Let us now move on to evaluative constructions expressing normative necessity, such as "è necessario" [*it is necessary*] and "è fondamentale" [*it is essential*]:

> (5) Per raggiungere l'obiettivo del 70% entro il 2030, *è necessario* però promuovere un maggiore sostegno all'allattamento, in particolare in tutti i luoghi di lavoro. (To achieve the 70% target by 2030, *it is necessary*, however, to promote greater support for breastfeeding, particularly in all workplaces.)
>
> (6) *È necessario* infatti che il sostegno alla natalità si attui con segnali concreti come questo, soprattutto nelle zone periferiche come le nostre [...]. (*It is necessary*, in fact, that support for birth rates be implemented through concrete measures such as this, especially in peripheral areas like ours)
>
> (7) I benefici dell'allattamento sono ampiamente noti, ma *è fondamentale* mettere le mamme in condizione di allattare serenamente. (The benefits of breastfeeding are widely known, but *it is essential* to create the conditions for mothers to breastfeed serenely.)

These examples illustrate the use of impersonal evaluative constructions that frame particular actions as necessary or desirable. From a discursive perspective, such structures perform what Jakobson (1981) describes as a conative function, insofar as they orient readers towards recognising the need for specific actions or policy interventions. At the same time, these constructions rely on impersonal grammatical forms that do not explicitly identify a responsible actor. This impersonality is discursively significant because it allows responsibility to remain diffuse. Rather than addressing a specific institutional or political actor, the discourse tends to present these actions as matters of general necessity or common sense. This gives the statements an appearance of neutrality and universality, while leaving largely unspecified who is actually responsible for putting these measures into practice.

Examples (5) and (6) further highlight the need to address structural barriers to breastfeeding. At the same time, example (6) suggests that breastfeeding discourse may intersect with broader political narratives about birth rates, family policy and traditional parenthood. This can be read as a form of interdiscursivity (Pêcheux 1983; Fairclough 1992), although the limited size of the corpus does not allow broader generalisation.

The final part of the analysis focuses on evaluative adjectives identified through the frequency lists generated during corpus analysis:

Adjective	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency per 1,000 words
buono	115	2.30
nuovo	101	2.02
delicato	72	1.44
materno	54	1.08
semplice	51	1.02

Table 2. Top 5 adjectives in the Allattamento corpus by raw frequency and normalised frequency per 1,000 words

(8) Il focus della Settimana è infatti sul *delicato equilibrio* tra allattamento e occupazione lavorativa affinché tutta la comunità contribuisca a sostenere le mamme […]. (The focus of the Week is on the *delicate balance* between breastfeeding and employment so that the whole community can contribute to supporting mothers.)

(9) Ma fino a oggi nessuno aveva pensato a "coprire", con una figura ad hoc, quel *momento complicato e delicato* che accompagna le neomamme subito dopo il parto e nei primi sei mesi di vita del loro bambino. (But until now no one had thought of "covering", through a dedicated role, that *complex and delicate moment* that accompanies new mothers immediately after childbirth and during the first six months of their baby's life.)

Examples (8) and (9) show the recurrent use of the adjective "delicato" [*delicate*] to characterise breastfeeding-related situations. In these concordance lines, "delicato" [*delicate*] functions as a premodifier of nouns such as "momento" [*moment*], "equilibrio" [*balance*] and "congiunzione" [*intersection*], thereby portraying breastfeeding and early motherhood as situations requiring care, sensitivity and social support. Within the appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005), these instances can be interpreted as cases of Appreciation, since they evaluate situations rather than individual behaviour. More specifically, they tend to realise Appreciation: Valuation, attributing significance to breastfeeding-related experiences by framing them as fragile or complex phases in women's lives. In terms of Lee's (2015) refinement of Appreciation, these cases are best understood as Sociality Valuation, since "delicato" encodes a broad social evaluation of vulnerability and sensitivity rather than material harm, epistemic validity or central importance. Expressions such as "momento delicato" [*delicate moment*] construct early motherhood as a sensitive period requiring attention and assistance, while "delicato equilibrio" [*delicate balance*] highlights the precarious relationship between breastfeeding and professional responsibilities.

(10) "Assistenti materne", che avranno il compito di accompagnare le neomamme in una quotidianità solo in apparenza *semplice*. ("Maternal assistants", whose role will be to accompany new mothers in a daily routine that is only apparently *simple*.)

(11) L'allattamento al seno per un tempo prolungato (almeno 12 mesi) potrebbe portare a *migliori risultati* a scuola durante l'adolescenza: lo suggerisce uno studio condotto presso l'Università di Oxford e pubblicato sulla rivista *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. (Prolonged breastfeeding (at least 12 months) may lead to *better results* at school during adolescence: this is suggested by a study conducted at the University of Oxford and published in the journal *Archives of Disease in Childhood*.)

(12) I bambini allattati al seno più a lungo sembrano avere il 39% in più di probabilità di ottenere *risultati migliori* agli esami che in Inghilterra si devono sostenere a 16 anni rispetto ai coetanei non allattati al seno [...]. (Children who are breastfed for longer appear to have a 39% higher probability of achieving *better results* in the exams that students in England take at the age of 16 compared to peers who were not breastfed.)

Examples (11) and (12) draw attention to the evaluative role of the adjective "buono" [*good*] and its comparative form "migliore" [*better*]. In these cases, breastfeeding is framed in explicitly positive terms, with particular emphasis on its perceived benefits. This includes claims that children who are breastfed may achieve better educational outcomes than those who are formula-fed. Given that educational success is a matter of concern for many parents, such claims are likely to carry considerable persuasive force.

This persuasive force is further reinforced through references to scientific authority. Example (11), for instance, cites research conducted at the University of Oxford and published in *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. From the perspective of appraisal theory, this strategy can be interpreted in terms of Engagement, specifically *dialogic contraction* (Martin and White 2005), since invoking scientific expertise restricts the space for alternative viewpoints and presents the value of breastfeeding as difficult to contest.

At the same time, this rhetorical pattern may also have exclusionary effects. By consistently presenting breastfeeding as the better option, the discourse can implicitly cast alternative feeding practices as less desirable, while overlooking the different circumstances faced by women who cannot or choose not to breastfeed. In this sense, pro-breastfeeding rhetoric goes beyond promoting a particular health practice; it also plays a role in shaping a moralised understanding of motherhood, against which women's choices and bodily conditions may be judged.

3.2. Digital Discourse Surrounding Baby Pit Stops

A recurring pattern in the Allattamento corpus concerns references to Baby Pit Stops (r. freq.: 36; n. freq.: 0.72), spaces described as safe environments where mothers can breastfeed and change their babies in public settings. To contextualise this pattern, a brief qualitative reading of UNICEF Italia's public communication on Baby Pit Stops was conducted. The extracts below are used as supplementary contextual material rather than as part of the corpus itself.

On the UNICEF Italia website, Baby Pit Stops are described as "una sosta sicura per allattare" [*a safe rest stop for breastfeeding*], a formulation that conveys a sense of security and protection for mothers. Particularly revealing, however, is the way breastfeeding itself is characterised in the institutional discourse:

(13) Italian version: Allattare è un *gesto semplice* e *naturale* che tutte le mamme *dovrebbero* poter fare ovunque: non ci sono orari fissi, né un numero definito di poppate nell'arco della giornata. Esistono molteplici modi di allattare ed è difficile per le mamme prevedere dove e quando il bambino chiederà di nutrirsi.

English translation (provided by the author): Breastfeeding is a *simple* and *natural gesture* that all mothers *should* be able to do anywhere: there are no fixed schedules or a defined number of feedings throughout the day. There are multiple ways to breastfeed and it's challenging for mothers to predict where and when the baby will ask to be nourished.

(14) Italian version: Allattare *non è solo compito delle donne* — perché funzioni davvero occorre una rete fatta da governi, famiglie, comunità locali, luoghi di lavoro e sistemi sanitari.

English translation: Breastfeeding *isn't just a women's duty* — for it to genuinely succeed, a network involving governments, families, local communities, workplaces and healthcare systems is essential.

What is particularly striking in example (13) is the way breastfeeding is described as "semplice" [*simple*] and "naturale" [*natural*]. The use of *semplice* sits somewhat uneasily with the broader corpus evidence, in which breastfeeding is often portrayed as difficult to manage alongside professional responsibilities. At the same time, the label "naturale" does more than simply describe; it implicitly constructs breastfeeding as the normative standard of infant feeding, thereby casting alternative practices in a less legitimate light. Although this does not explicitly stigmatise women who cannot or choose not to breastfeed, it contributes to constructing breastfeeding as the expected maternal behaviour, in line with Goffman's (1963) discussion of stigma. In Van Leeuwen's framework (2007), this representation combines *naturalisation* and *moral evaluation*, presenting breastfeeding as the expected maternal behaviour and rendering alternative feeding practices comparatively less legitimate.

Both examples (13) and (14) contain evaluative constructions expressing normative necessity. In example (13), this occurs through the modal expression "dovrebbero poter fare ovunque" [*should be able to do anywhere*], which frames breastfeeding as an activity that ought to be enabled across social contexts. In example (14), however, breastfeeding is described as "non solo compito delle donne" [*not just a women's duty*]. While this formulation appears to challenge an individualised responsibility, it nevertheless rearticulates breastfeeding as a collective obligation distributed across social actors. The noun "compito" [*duty/task*] remains revealing, as it frames breastfeeding within a discourse of obligation rather than choice, even as responsibility is extended beyond women alone.

More broadly, these formulations also participate in a process of mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen 2007), constructing the "good mother" as one who breastfeeds and organises her life around the child's needs. In this way, institutional discourse surrounding Baby Pit Stops promotes breastfeeding support while reinforcing culturally embedded expectations about maternal behaviour.

3.3. Analysis of the Breastfeeding Corpus

The initial frequency analysis of the Breastfeeding corpus reveals a particularly high frequency of the noun *mother* (r. freq.: 476; n. freq.: 6.50) (see Table 3), which emerges as the most frequent lexical item in the noun frequency list. This pattern reinforces the close association between motherhood and infant feeding in the English-language news discourse analysed in this study, suggesting that infant feeding continues to be discursively framed primarily as a maternal responsibility.

Noun	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency per 1,000 words
Mother	476	6.50
Baby	462	6.31
Breast	460	6.28
Milk	416	5.68
Health	330	4.51

Table 3. Top 5 nouns in the Breastfeeding corpus by raw frequency and normalised frequency per 1,000 words

Several concordance lines illustrate how breastfeeding is frequently discussed in relation to the challenges faced by working mothers attempting to balance infant feeding with professional responsibilities:

(15) However, for working mothers, the *challenge* of balancing breastfeeding with their *busy work schedules* often leads to a *difficult decision* or even giving up on breast-feeding altogether.

(16) Despite the legislation, research shows that *many companies are not making provision for mothers to express breast milk at their workplaces*, and it is hard for the government to enforce compliance within the private sector environments.

(17) However, breast-feeding can be *challenging* for new mothers, especially those doing it for the first time.

These examples reveal a recurring pattern in which breastfeeding is framed as a demanding practice, particularly in relation to employment and workplace environments. This tendency is further supported by the presence of lexical items belonging to the semantic field of difficulty, including *challenge* (r. freq.: 48; n. freq.: 0.66) and *challenging* (r. freq.: 13; n. freq.: 0.18). The recurrent association between motherhood and difficulty suggests that English-language media discourse often portrays breastfeeding as an activity requiring negotiation between maternal and professional roles.

To explore how alternative infant-feeding practices are represented, concordance lines containing the expression *formula feeding* were examined:

(18) But before you completely rule off breastfeeding and *jump on the band wagon of formula feeding*, let's take a look at the facts behind some common myths *so that you can make an informed choice* on how to feed your baby.

(19) Breast-feeding can *provide protection against many childhood illnesses* such as diarrhoea, allergies and middle ear infections. Yet, formula feeding is widely accepted in South Africa, *even though* it creates a significant *financial strain* in low-income households.

In examples (18) and (19), formula feeding is generally represented less favourably than breastfeeding through several discursive strategies. These include evaluative language privileging breastfeeding, references to social perceptions surrounding formula feeding and appeals to medical authority highlighting the health benefits of breastfeeding. The texts also foreground the financial burden associated with formula feeding in certain contexts, particularly for low-income households (example 19).

Further collocational patterns were explored using the Word Sketch function in Sketch Engine. The noun *feeding* (r. freq.: 245; n. freq.: 3.34), which ranks eighth among the most frequent nouns in the corpus, was selected as the node word for analysis. This choice was motivated by the analytical usefulness of *feeding* in the English corpus, given its broader semantic range in structuring discourse around infant feeding practices, rather than by the absence of an equivalent item in the Italian data.

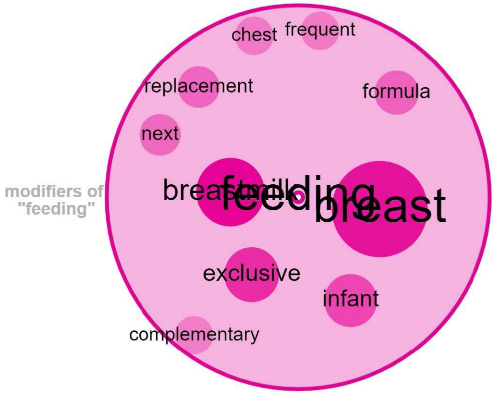

Figure 1. Visual representation of the most frequent modifiers of the noun *feeding* in the Breastfeeding corpus (English-language dataset)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the collocations *breastfeeding* and *breastmilk feeding* display a stronger association with the noun *feeding* than the broader hypernym *infant feeding*. Alternative practices such as *formula feeding* and *complementary feeding* occur less frequently. This distribution suggests that English-language news discourse tends to foreground breastfeeding when discussing infant feeding more generally. Concordance analysis further shows that references to feeding practices frequently co-occur with references to mothers, reinforcing the discursive construction of mothers as the primary agents responsible for infant feeding.

The pro-breastfeeding orientation of the corpus becomes even more evident in examples emphasising the medical benefits associated with breastfeeding:

(20) Among breastfeedings many *benefits*, breast milk contains optimal nutrition and gives an immune system boost to your baby. It also lowers long-term disease risk for both you and your child.

(21) For mothers, breastfeeding helps to reduce the risk of *postpartum depression* and it helps to *protect mothers* from developing *breast cancer* and *ovarian cancer*.

(22) There are *benefits for mum too*, it lowers a mother‘s risk of *breast cancer* and may reduce the risk of *ovarian cancer*, and also *burns around 500 calories* a day.

Across these examples, breastfeeding is presented as beneficial not only for infants but also for mothers. Several texts emphasise the reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancer, presenting breastfeeding as a practice contributing directly to maternal health. Example (22) additionally highlights the potential weight-loss effects associated with breastfeeding. Such arguments resonate with broader public health discourses surrounding postpartum weight gain and maternal wellbeing (Badon et al. 2019). From an appraisal perspective, these claims can be interpreted as instances of dialogic contraction, as they are presented as unproblematic, factual assertions that leave little room for alternative viewpoints or contestation (Martin and White 2005). At the same time, this focus may intersect with broader body-related discourses, including fat-shaming narratives, contributing to the complex interdiscursivity surrounding maternal bodies (Brookes and Baker 2021; Coltman-Patel 2023).

Another noteworthy finding emerging from the frequency analysis is the recurrence of the term *August* (r. freq.: 170; n. freq.: 2.32). Concordance lines reveal that this temporal marker frequently occurs in relation to awareness campaigns such as World Breastfeeding Week and National Breastfeeding Month:

(23) Breast-feeding Week is observed annually in the first week of *August* by the World Health Organization.

(24) Each *August*, National Breastfeeding Month is celebrated nationally to raise awareness about the rewards and challenges of breastfeeding.

References to *August* tend to cluster around institutional advocacy campaigns aimed at promoting breastfeeding awareness. This recurring pattern points to the strong visibility of organised public health initiatives in English-language media discourse.

Additional contextual material also indicates the involvement of organisations such as the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) in advancing these initiatives. On the USBC website, a section entitled Disrupting Formula Marketing Constellation features audiovisual materials designed to raise awareness of formula marketing practices. The use of the metaphor *constellation* is particularly suggestive, evoking a complex and interconnected network of commercial promotion.

(25) Laurence Grummer-Strawn, MPA, MA, PhD and Rachel Crossley, MSc help us learn about the *aggressive* and *unethical* marketing of commercial milk formula that undermines efforts to improve breastfeeding.

(26) In this third and final session in the series, Sally Mancini, MPH, presents research from the Rudd Center on infant formula and toddler milk marketing in the United States, demonstrating that *deceptive* formula marketing continues after infancy.

In these examples, adjectives such as *aggressive*, *unethical* and *deceptive* are used to characterise formula marketing practices. In the appraisal framework, these items can be interpreted as instances of Appreciation: Valuation, evaluating the practices of formula manufacturers as socially and morally problematic. In line with Lee's (2015) adaptation of the Valuation subsystem, these cases can be more specifically understood as Maintenance Valuation, as they foreground the harmful and disruptive effects of such practices on public health and breastfeeding outcomes. The pro-breastfeeding discourse promoted by the USBC is therefore partly constructed through negative evaluation of formula marketing, reinforced by references to scientific research.

Turning to evaluative adjectives more broadly, the frequency list reveals the recurrence of the adjective *good* (r. freq.: 116; n. freq.: 1.58) (see Table 4).

Adjective	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency per 1,000 words
good	116	1.58
new	102	1.39
exclusive	85	1.16
infant	79	1.08
important	58	0.79

Table 4. Top 5 adjectives in the Breastfeeding corpus by raw frequency and frequency per 1,000 words

This pattern often occurs in superlative constructions referring to breastfeeding as the *best* way to feed a child. The slogan *breast is best*, which appears three times in the corpus, further reinforces this evaluative framing.

(27) Breast milk is widely recognised as the *best* source of nutrition for infants, providing all the essential nutrients they need in the first six months of life.

(28) Breast feeding is a life-saving intervention. It is the *best* and safest thing for the child

(29) Breastfeeding is the *best* way to feed a baby. It is a universally accepted fact that a mother's milk provides all the nutrients that a baby needs for the first six months of life.

These examples consistently present breastfeeding as the optimal method of infant nutrition. While this paper does not seek to challenge the extensive scientific evidence supporting the benefits of breast milk, it is important to acknowledge the potential emotional impact of such discursive constructions, particularly for women who cannot or choose not to breastfeed.

One article included in the corpus, published in *The Guardian*, illustrates this dimension through the headline *"Unable to breastfeed my baby due to cancer, I* *was made to feel like a failure"* (2023). The passage recounts the experience of a woman who becomes pregnant while undergoing cancer treatment. Despite her medical condition, healthcare professionals repeatedly present breastfeeding as the "optimal" method of infant feeding. This framing has clear emotional consequences: the language of optimality contributes to a sense of failure when the woman is physically unable to breastfeed. More broadly, the account illustrates how institutional expectations surrounding breastfeeding can be felt very directly at the individual level.

The woman also describes a lack of guidance on alternative feeding options. Healthcare professionals consistently emphasised breastfeeding, yet offered little to no information about formula feeding, leaving her feeling isolated and uncertain about how to proceed. The passage further introduces an economic dimension to the issue. The suggestion that she should purchase donor breast milk from a milk bank, at a significant cost, points to the financial barriers that may accompany alternatives to breastfeeding. In this sense, infant feeding practices emerge not only as medical decisions, but as ones shaped by wider social and economic inequalities.

3.4. Comparative Discussion of the Allattamento and Breastfeeding Corpora

The comparison highlights both similarities and differences in the discursive representation of breastfeeding across the Italian and English-language corpora. In both corpora, infant feeding is strongly centred on maternal figures. The prominence of "mamma" [*mother/mum*], "donna" [*woman*] and *mother* suggests that infant feeding is discursively framed primarily as a maternal responsibility. In Van Leeuwen's terms (2007), this can be read as a form of naturalisation, reinforced by mythopoetic narratives of the "good mother".

Despite this shared focus on maternal actors, the concordance analysis reveals significant differences in the contexts in which mothers appear. In the Italian corpus, mothers are frequently portrayed as subjects who require supportive conditions and institutional assistance in order to breastfeed successfully. This pattern emerges clearly in a series of recurrent process-enabling constructions, such as "mettere in condizione" [*create the conditions for*], "mettere a proprio agio" [*put someone at ease*] and "consentire" [*allow/enable*]. These expressions tend to appear in descriptions of initiatives geared to facilitate breastfeeding, including the provision of dedicated spaces and support programmes.

Relatedly, references to "spazi confortevoli" [*comfortable spaces*] and "ambienti protetti" [*protected environments]* frame breastfeeding as something that becomes possible in supportive social and physical settings. From the perspective of the appraisal framework, these can be read as instances of Appreciation: the evaluation is directed not at individual actors, but at the surrounding conditions, foregrounding the importance of enabling infrastructures.

This focus on supportive environments is further reinforced by verbs associated with assistance, such as "aiutare" [*help*] and "sostenere" [*support*]. Working together, these patterns suggest that, in the Italian discourse, breastfeeding is not constructed solely as an individual maternal responsibility, but as a practice embedded in broader social arrangements. Initiatives such as Baby Pit Stop facilities exemplify this orientation, as they are represented as spaces that make it easier for mothers to breastfeed in public settings.

In the Breastfeeding corpus, maternal figures remain central, but the discourse brings different aspects of the experience into view. Concordance lines for *mother*, for instance, frequently occur in contexts that highlight the practical challenges women face when trying to combine breastfeeding with professional responsibilities. As seen in earlier examples, these include difficulties related to returning to work, managing feeding schedules and handling workplace constraints.

Lexical items associated with difficulty, such as *challenge* or *difficult decision*, contribute to framing breastfeeding as a demanding practice requiring sustained personal effort. This contrast becomes particularly evident in the way the two corpora construct the relationship between breastfeeding and employment. In the Italian dataset, difficulties are more often linked to structural conditions and institutional responses, such as maternity leave policies or organised support initiatives. In the English corpus, by contrast, similar challenges are more frequently narrated in terms of individual experience and personal choice.

A further point of divergence concerns the role of institutional and advocacy discourses. In the Breastfeeding corpus, breastfeeding is often discussed in connection with awareness campaigns tied to the temporal marker *August*, referring to initiatives such as World Breastfeeding Week and National Breastfeeding Month. This recurring reference suggests that English-language media discourse tends to situate breastfeeding within broader public health campaigns focused on awareness-raising.

In the Italian corpus, institutional actors such as UNICEF and local health authorities are also present, but the emphasis more often falls on practical interventions designed to support breastfeeding in everyday contexts. References to breastfeeding-friendly spaces, public facilities and local support networks point to a discourse that foregrounds infrastructural support rather than awareness campaigns alone.

Evaluative language further highlights differences between the two corpora. In the Allattamento corpus, evaluation often centres on the description of breastfeeding as a sensitive or complex phase in women's lives. Adjectives such as "delicato" [*delicate*] frequently appear in contexts that evoke moments of transition or the balancing of maternal and professional roles. In the appraisal framework, these instances can again be understood as Appreciation, capturing the perceived complexity of the situation rather than judging individuals directly.

In the Breastfeeding corpus, evaluative language more often takes a normative form. The adjective *best*, frequently found in expressions such as *the best way to feed a baby*, positions breastfeeding as the optimal feeding method. While both corpora promote breastfeeding as desirable, the Italian discourse tends to emphasise the outcomes associated with breastfeeding, whereas the English discourse more explicitly foregrounds the practice itself as the preferred option.

Jointly, these evaluative patterns contribute to the construction of a normative hierarchy in which breastfeeding is presented as both medically and morally preferable. This tendency aligns with earlier research on the moralisation of infant feeding practices (Kukla 2006; Wolf 2007; Lee and Bristow 2009). As Knaak (2005) observes, contemporary breastfeeding discourse often encourages mothers to internalise breastfeeding not simply as a health recommendation, but as a moral obligation.

At the same time, both corpora contain examples that complicate this normative framing. Personal testimonies from women unable to breastfeed highlight the emotional consequences that may arise when strongly prescriptive representations of breastfeeding collide with lived experiences shaped by medical or personal constraints.

Another similarity concerns the recurrent use of scientific discourse as a source of authority. In both corpora, references to medical research and public health institutions reinforce breastfeeding promotion while limiting the discursive space available for alternative feeding practices, thus functioning as instances of dialogic contraction (Martin and White 2005).

To synthesise the main findings of the comparative analysis, Table 5 provides an overview of the key discursive tendencies identified in the Allattamento and Breastfeeding corpora.

Discursive dimension	Allattamento corpus	Breastfeeding corpus	Illustrative examples
Central actors	Mothers represented as primary agents requiring support	Mothers represented as central actors navigating challenges	*mamma, donna* vs mother
Representation of breastfeeding	Enabled through supportive environments	Demanding personal practice requiring negotiation	*mettere in condizione* vs references to *challenge*

Discursive dimension	Allattamento corpus	Breastfeeding corpus	Illustrative examples
Role of institutions	Emphasis on infrastructures supporting breastfeeding	Emphasis on awareness campaigns and advocacy	Baby Pit Stops vs World Breastfeeding Week
Representation of difficulties	Structural issues requiring institutional support	Personal experiences and individual dilemmas	maternity policies vs workplace challenges
Evaluative language	Appreciation emphasising sensitive life stages (*delicato*)	Normative evaluation (*best, breast is best*)	*delicato* vs *best*
Discursive orientation	Socially supported practice embedded in community structures	Public health priority and personal responsibility	enabling environments vs advocacy discourse

Table 5. Summary of the main discursive tendencies emerging from the comparative analysis of the Allattamento corpus and Breastfeeding corpus. The patterns reported in the table are derived from the frequency lists and concordance analyses discussed in the previous sections

Taken together, these findings suggest that although both corpora promote breastfeeding as a desirable practice, they do so through different discursive strategies. The Italian corpus places greater emphasis on supportive environments and institutional measures that facilitate breastfeeding, framing it as a practice embedded in collective infrastructures. The English corpus more frequently frames breastfeeding through narratives of individual challenge, public health advocacy and moral evaluation of alternative feeding practices.

These differences should not be interpreted as reflecting fundamentally opposing attitudes toward breastfeeding in the two contexts. Rather, they illustrate how similar public health objectives may be articulated through different discursive orientations shaped by social, institutional and cultural factors. Viewed through the combined lens of corpus-based methods and discourse analysis, breastfeeding emerges not only as a biological practice but also as a socially mediated phenomenon whose meanings are negotiated within media discourse.

4. Conclusions

This study examined how breastfeeding is discursively constructed in contemporary Italian and Anglophone news media through a corpus-assisted cross-linguistic analysis of two comparable newspaper corpora. By combining corpus-based methods with discourse-analytical interpretation, the analysis explored how breastfeeding is represented, evaluated and legitimised in Italian- and English-language media discourse.

Overall, the findings reveal a strong convergence between the two datasets. Across both corpora, infant feeding is overwhelmingly framed as a maternal responsibility. Mothers consistently emerge as the most important social actors in frequency lists and concordance patterns, while fathers remain largely marginal. In this sense, breastfeeding is primarily constructed as an activity tied to maternal roles and expectations.

Breastfeeding is also repeatedly presented through evaluative discourse as the optimal, or 'best', method of infant feeding. By contrast, formula feeding tends to be positioned, often implicitly, as a less desirable option. Scientific discourse plays a central role in backing up this framing: references to medical research, health institutions and expert recommendations regularly function to legitimise breastfeeding, while narrowing the space in which alternative feeding practices can be discussed.

At the same time, the comparison points to notable cross-linguistic differences. In the Italian corpus, breastfeeding is often represented as a practice that depends on supportive infrastructures and institutional initiatives, which are framed as enabling it in everyday contexts. In the English-language corpus, by contrast, the emphasis shifts towards individual responsibility and personal experience, with particular attention to the challenges mothers face when trying to reconcile breastfeeding with professional commitments. This contrast may partly reflect broader cultural tendencies often associated in the literature with more collectivist orientations in Mediterranean contexts and more individualised framings in anglophone settings, although such interpretations should be approached with caution (Hofstede 2001).

A further point of divergence concerns how breastfeeding benefits are framed. In the Italian corpus, positive evaluations tend to foreground outcomes for the child, such as developmental or educational advantages. In the English corpus, by contrast, the emphasis more often falls on maternal health, particularly through references to reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancer.

As a whole, these findings suggest that breastfeeding in media discourse is not simply presented as a biological practice, but is layered within wider narratives about gender roles, responsibility and the moral expectations surrounding motherhood. Through evaluative language, scientific authority and recurring cultural narratives, media discourse contributes to constructing breastfeeding as a normative benchmark of good motherhood, while alternative feeding practices may be implicitly marginalised.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. First, the study is based on relatively small specialised corpora consisting of 100 newspaper articles for each language. Second, the English corpus includes texts from different anglophone regions rather than a single national press system. Finally, the analysis focuses exclusively on newspaper discourse and does not consider other influential media genres such as social media or healthcare communication.

Future research could extend this investigation by expanding the corpora to include larger datasets and additional media genres, as well as by examining breastfeeding discourse in specific national contexts. Further studies might also explore how fathers and other caregivers are represented in infant-feeding discourse and how digital environments shape contemporary discussions of breastfeeding.

Works Cited

Al Fajri, Muchamad Sholakhuddin, Hajar Abdul Rahim and Kumaran Rajandran. 2023. "A Corpus-assisted Discourse Study on the Construction of Obesity in Indonesian News Media". *Studies in English Language and Education* 10 (3): 1467-1484.

Alberta Breastfeeding Committee. n.d. "Vision and Mission". <https://www.breastfeedingalberta.ca/vision-mission>. Accessed April 6, 2026.

Andrews, Trudy and Samantha Knaak, S. 2013. "Medicalized Mothering: Experiences with Breastfeeding in Canada and Norway". *The Sociological Review* 61 (1): 88-110.

Avishai, Orit. 2007. "Managing the Lactating Body: The Breast-feeding Project and Privileged Motherhood". *Qualitative Sociology* 30: 135-152.

Badon, S. E., M. M. Hedderson, R. J. Hyde, C. P. Quesenberry and L. A. Avalos. 2019. "Pre- and Early Pregnancy Onset Depression and Subsequent Rate of Gestational Weight Gain". *Journal of Women's Health* 28 (9): 1237-1245.

Baker, Paul. 2014. *Using Corpora to Analyze Gender*. Bloomsbury.

Baker, Paul. 2023. *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*. 2nd Edition. Bloomsbury.

Baker, P. and Erez Levon. 2015. "Picking the Right Cherries? A Comparison of Corpus-based and Qualitative Analyses of News Articles about Masculinity". *Discourse and Communication* 9 (2): 221-236.

Baker, Paul and Tony McEnery. 2015. *Corpora and Discourse: Integrating Discourse and Corpora*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. University of Texas Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage.

Brookes, Gavin, Sarah Atkins and Kevin Harvey. 2022. "Corpus Linguistics and Health Communication: Using Corpora to Examine the Representation of Health and Illness". In O'Keeffe, A. and M. McCarthy (eds.): 615-628.

Brookes, Gavin and Paul Baker. 2021. *Obesity in the News: Language and Representation in the Press*. Cambridge U.P.

CARLIN, Na'ama. 2023. "Unable to Breastfeed my Baby Due to Cancer, I was Made to Feel Like a Failure". *The Guardian* (March 8). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/08/unable-to-breastfeed-my-baby-due-to-cancer-i-was-made-to-feel-like-a-failure>. Accessed March 16, 2026.

COLTMAN-PATEL, Tara. 2023. *(Mis)representing Weight and Obesity in the British Press: Fear, Divisiveness, Shame and Stigma*. Springer.

CRAWFORD, Robert. 2006. "Health as a Meaningful Social Practice". *Health* 10 (4): 401-420.

EGBERT, Jesse and Paul BAKER. (eds.) 2019. *Using Corpus Methods to Triangulate Linguistic Analysis*. Routledge.

EGBERT, Jesse, Tove LARSSON and Douglas BIBER. 2020. *Doing Linguistics with a Corpus: Methodological Considerations for the Everyday User*. Cambridge U.P.

FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity Press.

FUREDI, Frank. 2002. *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts may be Best for your Child*. Chicago Review Press.

GOFFMAN, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall.

GUEST, Greg, Arwen BUNCE and Laura JOHNSON. 2006. "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability". *Field Methods* 18 (1): 59-82.

HALLIDAY, Michael Alexander Kirkwood and Christian M.I.M. MATTHIESSEN. 2014. *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 4th Edition. Routledge.

HAUCK, Yvonne L., Zoe BRADFIELD and Lesley KULIUKAS. 2021. "Women's Experiences with Breastfeeding in Public: An Integrative Review". *Women and Birth* 34 (3): 217-227.

HEFFERNAN, Valerie and Gay WILGUS. 2020. "Introduction: Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century — Images, Representations, Constructions". In *Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century*. Routledge: 1-18.

HOFSTEDE, Geert. 2001. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*. Sage.

JAKOBSON, Roman. 1981. *Selected Writings*. Mouton.

KILGARRIFF, Adam, Vojtěch BAISA, Jan BUŠTA, Miloš JAKUBÍČEK, V Vojtěch KOVÁŘ, Jan MICHELFEIT, Pavel RYCHLÝ and Vít SUCHOMEL. 2014. "The Sketch Engine: Ten Years On". *Lexicography* 1 (1): 7-36.

KNAAK, Samantha. 2005. "Breast-feeding, Bottle-feeding and Dr. Spock: The Shifting Context of Choice". *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 42 (2), 197-216.

KUKLA, Rebecca. 2006. "Ethics and Ideology in Breastfeeding Advocacy Campaigns". *Hypatia* 21 (1): 157-180.

LEE, Ellie. 2008. "Living with Risk in the Era of 'Intensive Motherhood': Maternal Identity and Infant Feeding". *Health, Risk and Society* 10 (5): 467-477.

LEE, Ellie. and Jennie BRISTOW. 2009. "Rules for Feeding Babies". In Sclater, Shelley Dale, Christine Piper and E. Taylor (eds.) *Regulating Autonomy*. Hart Publishing.

LEE, Sook Hee. 2015. "Evaluative Stances in Persuasive Essays by Undergraduate Students: Focusing on Appreciation Resources". *Text and Talk* 35 (1): 49-76.

LOBEL, Marci and Richard S. DELUCA. 2007. "Psychosocial Sequelae of Cesarean Delivery: Review and Analysis of their Causes and Implications". *Social Science and Medicine* 64 (11): 2272-2284.

Martin, James R. and Peter R.R. White. 2005. *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mary, S. M., Robbie Duschinsky, Laura Davis, Sam Dunnett and Brian Coughlan. 2025. "Representations of Motherhood in the Media: A Systematic Literature Review". *Information, Communication and Society* 28 (1): 169-186.

O'Keeffe, Anne and Michael McCarthy. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*. Routledge.

Partington, Alan, Alison Duguid and Charlotte Taylor. 2013. *Patterns and Meanings in Discourse: Theory and Practice in Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies (CADS)*. John Benjamins.

Pêcheux, Michel. 1983. *Language, Semantics and Ideology*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Petersen, Alan and Deborah Lupton. 2000. *The New Public Health: Health and Self in the Age of Risk*. Sage.

Reese, Helen. 2005. "From Parental Responsibility to Parenting Responsibility". *Current Legal Issues* 8: 459-483.

Slovic, Paul. 2000. *The Perception of Risk*. Earthscan.

UNICEF. n.d. *Baby Pit Stop*. <https://www.unicef.it/italia-amica-dei-bambini/insieme-per-allattamento/baby-pit-stop/>. Accessed November 19, 2023.

United States Breastfeeding Committee. n.d. https://www.usbreastfeeding.org/. Accessed November 22, 2023.

Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2007. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. Routledge.

Wolf, Joan B. 2007. "Is Breast Really Best? Risk and Total Motherhood in the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign". *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 32 (4): 595-636.

Zottola, Angela, Giuseppe Balirano and Jai Mackenzie. 2024. "The Discursive Construction of Contemporary Family Types: An Introduction". *de genere — Rivista di Studi Letterari, Postcoloniali e di Genere* 10: 1-8.

Received: 31/01/2026
Accepted: 19/03/2026

WRITING THE SELF ON THE THRESHOLD: CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND (SELF-)TRANSLATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *IN OTHER WORDS*

ESCRIBIR EN EL UMBRAL: HIBRIDEZ CULTURAL Y AUTOTRADUCCIÓN EN *IN OTHER WORDS* DE JHUMPA LAHIRI

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611371

DAVID AMEZCUA
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
damezcua@ucm.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0936-587X

Abstract

This article deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2016) as an example of ectopic literature and translingual writing. Lahiri decided to move away from her mother tongue in 2014 to start a new literary career as a writer in Italian. Thus, this study examines how decisive the ongoing act of translation is in this author's literary production. While Lahiri's preoccupation with cultural translation is a central theme in her English fiction, the author's wish to translate herself into Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self. According to Lahiri, metaphors are the cornerstone of this book, as they account for how the author's thinking unfolded while writing this work. I will also analyse the role of this rhetorical device in this so-called linguistic autobiography. In doing so, I contend that metaphors drive the author's self-translation into Italian. Finally, I will tackle the fictional thematisation of translation in Lahiri's first fictional story in Italian, "The Exchange", as an instance of transfiction. In turn, I will explore how both the author's self-translation into Italian and transfiction can relate to forms of life-writing.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, translingualism, world literature, transfiction, ectopic literature, life-writing.

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda la obra *In Other Words* (2019) de Jhumpa Lahiri como un ejemplo de literatura ectópica o escritura translingüe. Como consecuencia de un deseo de abandonar la lengua inglesa como cauce de creación literaria, Lahiri decidió *mudarse* a la lengua italiana en 2014. Así, este trabajo analiza cómo concibe la autora el acto de *traducirse* a otra lengua. En este sentido, el hecho de adoptar la lengua italiana como lengua de expresión literaria se plantea como una necesidad identitaria y ontológica. Esta *mudanza* a la lengua italiana se sostiene sobre la base del dispositivo retórico de la metáfora, piedra angular de *In Other Words* según Jhumpa Lahiri. Por ello, este artículo también tiene en cuenta el papel decisivo de la metáfora en esta *autobiografía lingüística*. De este modo, se puede afirmar que la metáfora encauza y facilita la *autotraducción* a la lengua italiana llevada a cabo por Jhumpa Lahiri. Finalmente, se aborda la tematización ficcional de la noción de traducción en la primera historia de ficción que Lahiri escribe en italiano, "Lo scambio", como ejemplo de transficción. A su vez, se analiza cómo la autotraducción y la transficción dialogan con los textos englobados dentro del género autobiográfico.

Palabras clave: Jhumpa Lahiri, translingüismo, literatura mundial, transficción, literatura ectópica, literaturas del yo.

1. Introduction

Scrutinising the effects that migration has on an author's literary work has become a focal point in the field of comparative and world literature in recent decades (Kellman 2000, 2017; Siskind 2012; Ibáñez 2016, 2020; Albaladejo 2019; Damrosch 2020; Bergantino 2023). According to Mariano Siskind, "world literature produces new genres [and] new generic formations […] defined in accordance with new needs and new critical and aesthetic desires" (2012: 346). These needs and critical desires demand a profound re-examination of the potential that world literature has to adumbrate new generic formations which may require new critical discourses and theoretical approaches. One such theoretical framework has been proposed by Tomás Albaladejo, who first defined the term 'ectopic literature' in an article titled "Sobre la literatura ectópica" (2011). This term is used to describe, analyse and explain "[the] literary production that is […] written outside an author's place of origin […] by authors who have moved to another place […] where they are living and writing" (Luarsabishvili 2013; cf. Amezcua Gómez 2014, 2016; Hellín Nistal 2015; Albaladejo 2019: 401; Amezcua Gómez and Martínez Moraga 2022). This new literary production, which is written outside the author's place of origin, may imply in most cases adopting a new language of literary expression, as occurs with Jhumpa Lahiri's first book in Italian, *In altre parole* (2015). Jhumpa Lahiri's work in Italian might also fall within the rubric of a special form of literature that has been referred to as translation literature, that is, writing in a non-native language as an act of translation (Gong 2014; Ibáñez 2016, 2020). As a result, it could be claimed that the author's use of the Italian language becomes a migrant writer's *homeland* of sorts, to use the term the Chinese author Ha Jin employs in his essay *The Writer as Migrant* (Jin 2008: 61-86). Thus, Lahiri's bilingual creativity (Zhang 2002: 306; Ibáñez 2016, 2020) seems to allow her to rethink her own hybrid identity as cross-cultural, as it is the case of other so-called hyphenated authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman or Aleksandar Hemon, to name but a few of a long list (Vidal Claramonte 2014).

A bestselling Anglophone writer, Lahiri left New York for Rome in 2014 and decided to move out of her mother tongue to start a new literary career as a writer in Italian. Thus, her decision to write in Italian is the culmination of a compounded journey of identity (Lutzoni 2017). Lahiri's first book in Italian was translated into English in 2016 by Anne Goldstein. *In Other Words* (2016) was published with the Italian text appearing on the verso page, and the English translation on the recto page. As Lahiri pointed out, the brief "Author's Note" that opens the English translation constitutes "the first formal prose I have composed in English since my last book, *The Lowland*, was completed, in 2012" (Lahiri 2016: xiii). The fact that this US writer of Bengali descent decided to adopt the Italian language as an adult also allows us to examine her work in the light of translingual and exophonic writing (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021). Hence, I will examine *In Other Words* (2016) through the lens of ectopic literature but also as an illustration of translingual writing (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021; Bergantino 2023).

According to Lahiri, *In Other Words* is a book sprinkled with metaphors. In the words of the author, this book "began with a metaphor that led to another, and then to another" (Lahiri 2022: 11). Given Jhumpa Lahiri's reliance on this rhetorical device, I will tackle the metaphorical fabric underpinning this work. I contend that this book's metaphors channel Lahiri's self-translation into Italian. This self-translation plays a decisive role for a writer who claimed that "I was a translator before I was a writer" (2). In light of Lahiri's reliance on translation as one of her "primary heuristic key[s]" (Lahiri 2022: 5), I will also analyse the fictional thematisation of translation as an instance of 'transfiction' in her first fictional story in Italian, "Lo Scambio" ["The Exchange"]. The figure of the translator has been a pervasive presence in Lahiri's work, both in English and in Italian. In this sense, it may be argued that the author seems to project her own life events into the realm of fiction through transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 947). Thus, following Bergantino, I will finally consider how both the author's self-translation into Italian and the notion of transfiction can relate to forms of contemporary life-writing (Bergantino 2023: 947).

2. Living in Other Words. Writing in Others' World: Ectopic Literature

The term ectopic literature was first proposed in 2007 by Tomás Albaladejo in the "Working Papers of the Research Group Communication, Poetics and Rhetoric" at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. This concept was later developed in an article titled "Sobre la literatura ectópica" (Albaladejo 2011). The article established Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place* (1999) as a prime example of this kind of literature. In his memoir, this American-Palestinian literary critic offered the following reflection on his own exile experience: "More interesting for me as an author was the sense I had of trying always to translate experiences that I had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language" (1999: xv). As shown in the case of Said, writing in another place often implies adopting a different language other than the writer's mother tongue, which reinforces the fact that ectopic authors not only can move to a new country but also to another linguistic context.

Literature is a hybrid activity, as it has the capacity of travelling through different countries and cultures (Albaladejo 2019). Albaladejo has referred to the foundational myth of the rape of Europa by Zeus "as a symbol of the hybrid nature of a European culture that was fed by Eastern cultures, which offered it techniques like writing, as well as literary forms and topics" (2019: 397). Thus, literature's hybrid nature and the travelling subjects that produce it account for the notion of 'transnation' proposed by Bill Ashcroft:

> So the concept of 'the' transnation I am proposing is composed not only of diasporas but of the rhizomic interplay of travelling subjects within and between nations. The transnation exists within, beyond and between nation states. It is a collectivity comprised of communities, who may be drawn in one way or another to the myth of a particular nation state, but who draw away perpetually into the liberating region of representational undecidability [sic]. (2010: 22)

Nowadays, transnational networks reshape our understanding of world literature and adumbrate new cultural mappings which can be interpreted more thoroughly through the lens of ectopic literature. The literature that is produced in a country other than that of an author's birthplace coexists with other languages and literatures, and that concurrence paves the way to several forms of cultural relationships such as multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, transculturalism and interculturalism (Albaladejo 2019: 399-400).

There are several reasons why writers move to other countries. Exile and diaspora are causes of displacement as well as the search for better living conditions or simply moving to a country where a given author feels that her or his literary production might thrive more fruitfully (Albaladejo 2019: 400-401). As for the several criteria that must be considered in order to explain ectopic literature, Albaladejo highlights “the age of the writer when she or he moved from the place of origin”, if the author “was a literary writer before changing location” and whether the author has emigrated willingly or forcibly (2019: 402).

As the title of Edward Said’s memoir suggests, ectopic literature is written “out of place” and as such it takes root in new soil where it may flourish. Far from being a deterritorialised literature (Deleuze and Guattari 1990; Ruiz-Sánchez 2005), ectopic literature’s nomadic and hybrid nature turns an initial “ontology of rootlessness” (De Donno 2021: 106) into a new existential condition. Hence, ectopic literature is fertilised and nurtured through contact with other languages and literatures and it ultimately becomes reterritorialised. In this sense, Julia Kristeva’s notions of geno-text and pheno-text prove very useful when we consider the hybrid nature of ectopic literature. Thus, the multicultural foundation of the ectopic author’s culture of origin is active and manifests itself in the language of literary expression adopted by the ectopic writer (Kristeva 1974: 95; Kristeva 1976). In other words, to use Kristeva’s terminology, the geno-text crystallises as a pheno-text in the ectopic author’s literary work, as the latter appears to sprout from the culture of origin (1976: 281).

Place and language possess, then, an axiomatic role in the open typology of types of ectopic literature proposed by Albaladejo (2011, 2019). Jhumpa Lahiri would fall within the first type of ectopic literature, which is that of ectopic authors who have moved from their birthplace to another country and have adopted the official language of that country. Authors such as Joseph Conrad, Kazuo Ishiguro, Eva Hoffman, Ha Jin, Andreï Makine and Jhumpa Lahiri herself, to name but a few of a long list, would fall within this first type of ectopic literature.[1]

Even though Albaladejo initially proposed four main types of ectopic literature,[2] it is worth noting that he claims to have offered a tentative and open typology of ectopic literature and encourages us to consider “the many possibilities of ectopic literature” (2019: 404) such as how these circumstances contribute to the ectopia of his or her own writing (2019: 404). In Jhumpa Lahiri’s case, Italian was adopted as an adult after the author became a bestselling Anglophone writer. In light of this particular situation, I will also analyse Lahiri’s translation into Italian through the lens of translingual literature.

3. Translingual/Exophonic Literature: The Case of Jhumpa Lahiri

It can be argued that ectopic literature is both an encompassing and capacious concept that delves into the effects of migration and geographical displacement in the work of the so-called ectopic authors. However, there are other fruitful concepts such as translingualism or exophonic writing that shed light on those ectopic writers who have adopted a new language of literary expression, particularly when that language was adopted as an adult. In this sense, it can be argued that an author like Jhumpa Lahiri is a prime example of translingual writing, a term coined by Steven Kellman (2000) to refer to authors who use more than one language of literary expression (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021: 106). Jhumpa Lahiri decided to use Italian since the publication of *In altre parole* in 2015, having produced so far three more books in the language: *Dove mi trovo* (2018) [*Whereabouts* (2021)], *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021) and *Racconti Romani* (2022) [*Roman Stories* (2023)]. Thus, Lahiri's translingual experience embodies an existential condition, which clearly crystallises in her *oeuvre* in Italian (De Donno 2021: 106).

Born in London in 1967 to immigrants from Calcutta, Lahiri moved with her family to Rhode Island, in the US, when she was three years old. Before moving to the Italian language, Lahiri had already authored four acclaimed works of fiction in English such as *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). Her literary production in her dominant language received some of the most prestigious prizes in the Anglophone literary world such as a Pulitzer Prize, a PEN/Hemingway Award and a National Humanities Medal. As mentioned above, after moving to Rome in 2014, Lahiri experienced the desire to migrate into Italian in literary terms. In Rome she completed *In altre parole* in 2015, her first book in a language that Lahiri discovered at around the age of twenty-five. According to the author, "there was no need to learn that language. No family, cultural, social pressure. No necessity" (Lahiri 2022: 153). When asked about this desire to start a literary career as a writer in Italian, she has responded that "it was born from the realization that I am a writer without a true mother tongue; from feeling, in some sense, linguistically orphaned" (10). Thus, even though Lahiri counts Bengali and English as her mother tongues, it is in Italian where she has found her new linguistic home. In her essay "Why Italian?" (2022), Lahiri has tried to respond to the question of why, after having become a successful writer in English, she moved to the Italian language. According to the author, a short answer to this question could be that she writes in Italian to feel free (11).

However, Lahiri has also resorted to metaphors to shed light on her decision to move out of her mother tongues. Lahiri contends that one of those metaphors is that of the graft, a capacious and comprehensive botanical term that describes the author's experiment in Italian. In the words of the author, "My life is a series of grafts [...]. As the child of immigrants, I am myself the fruit of a risky graft that is geographical and cultural. [...] A graft explains and defines me. And now that

I write in Italian, I myself have become a graft" (Lahiri 2022: 20). Moreover, migrancy, errancy and belonging were recurrent themes explored in Lahiri's work in English. Actually, most of the characters of her Anglophone production are portrayed "in a thick mist of human displacement, nostalgia and identity loss" (Lutzoni 2017: 111). While this thematic concern also surfaces in *In Other Words*, it may be argued that Lahiri's *oeuvre* in Italian crystallises more explicitly her struggles to find a new linguistic home — an existential quest that has shaped the narrative drive of her work:

> Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself an incomplete person […]. Maybe there is a linguistic reason — the lack of a language to identify with. As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without an accent, to satisfy my parents […]. But it was impossible. On the other hand, I wanted to be considered an American, yet, despite the fact that I speak English perfectly, that was impossible, too. I was suspended rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined. (Lahiri 2016: 111)

As mentioned above, Lahiri has described *In Other Words* as "a sort of linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait" (2016: 213). This language memoir provides a detailed account of how Lahiri acquires a new language (Kellman 2017: 121). The Polish writer Eva Hoffman approached this theme in 1989, when she published *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. In her autobiography, Hoffman described how her native Polish and her adopted English harmonised through what she called her translation therapy:

> […] in my translation therapy, I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I —one person, first-person singular— have been on both sides. Patiently, I use English as a conduit to go back and down; all the way down to childhood, almost to the beginning […]. I begin to see where the languages I've spoken have their correspondences — how I can move between them without being split by the difference. (Hoffman 1989: 273-274)

In Eva Hoffman's memoir the act of translation is depicted as a conduit that connects Hoffman's life and experiences in another language —Polish— and the 'I' of her current new life in English. It could be argued that this translation of the self that "keeps going back and forth over the rifts" is a *tópos*, the place where Hoffman seems to reside (Amezcua Gómez 2014). Switching languages and translating the self in other words play a decisive role in Jhumpa Lahiri, as I will explain later. Both Lahiri and Hoffman produce an insightful account of their lives in a new language. Yet Lahiri's move to Italian represents an unprecedented and unique example of an author who decides to publish her work in a language that she did not master. According to Lahiri, her linguistic romance with Italian dates back to 1994, when she and her sister decided to give themselves a trip to Florence (Italy) as a present (Lahiri 2016: 13). From the start, Lahiri felt both a connection and a detachment, "something physical, inexplicable […]. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight" (15). Later on, Lahiri decided to write her doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century, which gave her another reason to study Italian (21). But it was in the spring of 2000, after receiving an invitation to the Mantua literary festival, that she realised how limited she was when expressing herself in Italian, despite having studied the language intently. According to her, visiting Italy as a writer gave her a turning point: "In Mantua […] I finally find myself inside the language. Because in the end to learn a language, to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue […] however imperfect" (25). As Lahiri has declared, "imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more alive I feel" (113). Hence, Lahiri's decision to write in a language other than her primary one, English, implies that she can also be considered a translingual author because as a result of her love affair with Italian, she wilfully decided to write solely in this language (Kellman 2019: 342). In addition, following Albaladejo's criteria, she is also an ectopic writer since a considerable part of her work in Italian has been produced in Italy. Lahiri is currently Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English at Barnard College in New York but also spends part of the year in Italy. Arndt, Naguschewski and Stockhammer (2011) have coined the term 'Exophonie', "from the Greek exo: moving out; phony: sound/voice" (De Donno 2021: 104), to refer to "translingual writing that takes place in a newly adopted or secondary language — a language often learned as an adult" (De Donno 2021: 104). Thus, moving out of one's mother tongue gives way to a compounded relationship between linguistic attachment, identity and creativity (De Donno 2021: 106), which Lahiri has accurately described as being "suspended rather than rooted" (2016: 111). In this sense, *In Other Words* is a compelling illustration of how translingual writers can "translate the ontology of rootlessness and the dilemmas of identity into narratives of self-discovery, creative freedom and linguistic romance" (De Donno 2021: 106).

Moving to the Italian language problematises Lahiri's hybrid and fragmented identity. In the chapter "The Triangle", she refers to the arrival of Italian as the third point on her linguistic journey, a point that creates the figure of a triangle. Italian seems to piece together a new sense of self that mirrors this hybrid identity (De Donno 2021: 107). In "The Triangle", Lahiri discloses what this figure means for her: "I think that this triangle is a kind of frame. And that the frame contains my self-portrait. The frame defines me, but what does it contain?" (Lahiri 2016: 157). More than a mere language, Italian is rather a home where Lahiri hopes to fix her fragmented self as an Anglophone author of the Indian diaspora in the US (De Donno 2021: 107). An emblem of Lahiri's self-begetting linguistic home, the triangle embodies the negotiation that takes place in Lahiri's translingual writing.

It is in the interstices of this in-between space that Lahiri struggles to dwell in. Hence, when Jhumpa Lahiri introduces a third language into her life, she delves into an uncharted territory that nurtures her creative impulse.

Lahiri's *In Other Words* opens with a quote from Antonio Tabucchi's *Requiem: A Hallucination* (1994) that reads "I needed a different language: a language that was a place of affection and reflection". It is worth noting that this quote echoes Lahiri's own quest for a language adequate enough to fully express herself (Pireddu 2021: 899). Tabucchi's words encapsulate Lahiri's own problematisation of "language and country as dwellings and spaces of belonging" (899). In fact, Tabucchi seems to describe language as a *tópos* or space of residence, which is even more compounded in Lahiri's case. Thus, I endorse Nicoletta Pireddu when she argues that "Lahiri dwells in a nomadic homelessness" (899). This nomadic homelessness accounts for an existential condition which results from her multifaceted identity. Thus, the Italian language constitutes one more layer of Lahiri's multifarious hybrid identity (Lutzoni 2017), a place where Lahiri's nomadic homelessness strikes its roots. The issues of language are, then, issues of identity (Lutzoni 2017: 116), as Lahiri herself reminds us: "Ever since I was a child, I've belonged only to my words. I don't have a country, a specific culture. If I didn't write, if I didn't work with words, I wouldn't feel that I'm present on the earth" (2016: 87). Thus, in an autobiographical article "Trading Stories: Notes from an Apprenticeship", published in 2011 in *The New Yorker*, she refers to this idea in the following terms:

> When I became a writer, my desk became home; there was no need for another. Every story is a foreign territory, which, in the process of writing, is occupied and abandoned. I belong to my work, to my characters […]. My parents' refusal to let go or to belong fully to either place is at the heart of what I, in a less literal way, try to accomplish in writing. Born of my inability to belong, it is my refusal to let go.

Having a desk of one's own seems to be all Lahiri needs to belong. In this sense, the desk could be seen as the very emblem of the ectopic and translingual writer. Thus, it seems that Lahiri's sense of belonging is accomplished through literature and that literary creation becomes the site where her nomadic homelessness fades away (Pireddu 2021). Not belonging to any specific place is, then, one of the main thematic concerns in Lahiri's work and as such it is widely explored in *In Other Words*. Interestingly, in this linguistic autobiography, Lahiri resorts to the image of the desk as the only site which can provide a certain sense of belonging: "Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk" (Lahiri 2016: 133).

4. Liminal Spaces: Translating the Self into (Trans)fiction

It can be argued that the rhetorical device of the metaphor is used as a preferential form of expression in this book (Amezcua Gómez and Martínez Moraga 2022). In fact, when Jhumpa Lahiri published *Translating Myself and Others* (2022), a collection of essays that addresses the importance of translation in her work, she included an essay on the role of metaphors in *In Other Words*. Hence, in that essay she claimed that "If *In Other Words* needs a key, it's the book itself. I began with a metaphor that led me to another, and then another. That was how my thinking unfolded. In the book, my slow but stubborn learning of Italian is a lake to cross, a wall to climb, an ocean to probe. A forest, a bridge, a child, a lover, a sweater, a building, a triangle" (2022: 11).

Drawing from Lahiri's words, the book itself seems to be a metaphor, as its title suggests. As such, Lahiri's migration into Italian is in itself the overarching metaphor on which this autobiography relies. However, the title of this book not only suggests an implicit metaphorical interpretation, but also every one of the titles of the twenty-four chapters of *In Other Words* are open to this interpretation. The role of metaphors as posited by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) establishes that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (2003: 3). As a result of this cognitive process (Indurkhya 1992, 2007; Arduini 2007) which takes place in speakers, writers and recipients, metaphors connect vehicles and tenors as both the present and absent features of this rhetorical device (Richards 1986: 85-86). Thus, metaphors are granted a central place in the construction of our reality, which is always rhetorically constructed (Pujante 2016, 2017).

In what follows, I will examine the role of metaphors in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* in order to gauge the extent to which this book hinges upon this rhetorical device. Metaphors prove useful for language learners when trying to convey their personal experience (Kramsch 2009: 99), as can arguably be appreciated in Lahiri's book. Accordingly, I contend that metaphors propel Jhumpa Lahiri's self-translation into Italian. In light of Lahiri's reliance on metaphor, it is worth noting that both 'metaphor' and 'translation' have a common etymology due to the fact that Latin used both the terms 'metaphora' and 'translation' to refer to this rhetorical trope (Albaladejo 2023: 4). Actually, as Hutton has aptly noted, "the prefix 'meta' in the Greek noun μεταφορα […], as well as the Latin 'trans' in transferre and translation, suggest both movement across and change" (2023: 509). Both this movement across and change account for Lahiri's metaphorical migration into Italian and signal the central role that translation plays in Lahiri's own conception of writing. It comes as no surprise, then, that Lahiri has referred to translation in the following terms: "I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a nonexistential one [...]. I translate, therefore I am" (2002: 120). Thus, given the central role of translation in Lahiri's literary and essayistic production, I will also tackle the fictional thematisation of translation, i.e. transfiction, in her work.

As a book sprinkled with metaphors, many of which are connected with overarching conceptual metaphors such as "Life is a Journey" (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Lakoff 1993), "Quest is a Journey" and a "Story is a Journey" (Forceville 2011), Lahiri uses multiple metaphors that resonate thematically with these conceptual metaphors. This is the case of "The Dictionary": "[The dictionary] becomes both a map and a compass, and without it I'd be lost. It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can't go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations. On the first page, at a certain point, I write: "provare a=cercare di" (try to=seek to). That random fragment, that lexical equation, might be a metaphor for the love I feel for Italian" (2016: 9).

Thus, the dictionary is a map and a compass, a mother and a father, a sacred text and a lexical equation. Lahiri writes on the first page of the dictionary the Italian words for "try to" and "seek to", which, she says, might be a metaphor for the love she feels for Italian. The linguistic romance metaphors pervade the whole book, as De Donno has aptly observed (De Donno 2021). Lahiri's linguistic romance with Italian is widely channelled through this rhetorical device. Thus, in the first chapter of the book, "The Crossing", the author describes the beginning of her linguistic journey in the following terms: "I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support [...]. On the other side you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore" (2016: 3).

In "The Diary" Lahiri uses another metaphor to describe the new direction her writing has just taken: "A second metaphor comes to mind: it's as if, poorly equipped, I were climbing a mountain. It's a sort of literary act of survival. I don't have many words to express myself — rather, the opposite" (2016: 57). Similarly, she refers to the metaphor of literature as a mirror of reality. She is aware of the fact that a pure representation of the real through fiction is a literary mirage that is ultimately unavailable: "Even a novel drawn from reality, faithful to it, is not the truth, just as the image in the mirror is not a person in flesh and blood. It remains, that is, an abstraction, no matter how realistic, how close to the facts" (2016: 227). As mentioned previously in the chapter "The Triangle", the metaphor of the mirror proves also effective to elucidate Lahiri's hybrid identity.

The chapters that compose this book are fragmentary and short and can be read as stand-alone pieces. As Lahiri states in the "Afterword", her book "originated in the fall of 2012, in a private, fragmented, spontaneous way […]. I had a notebook in which I took notes in Italian, on Italian […]. Gradually the notes became sentences, and the sentences paragraphs. It was a sort of diary, written without forethought" (2016: 209). Following the author's words, we can identify two axiomatic themes that pertain to the genesis of this book. First, the fact that *In Other Words* sprouts from her fragmentary diaries. Second, that while writing this book, Lahiri seemed to embrace the poetics of another ectopic writer, James Joyce, when he famously claimed that "a book should not be planned out beforehand, but as one writes it will form itself, subject, as I say, to the constant emotional promptings of one's personality" (Power 1974: 95). It could be argued that the writing of this book was subject to Lahiri's "emotional promptings", yet this does not imply that the book lacks a narrative arc. As the author has claimed, the central subject of this book is language — both as a tool and as a theme (2016: 211).

I have argued before that metaphors drive the author's translation into Italian. Accordingly, both metaphor and translation implicitly suggest the idea of movement and change. It could also be claimed that the metaphorical fabric underpinning this book paves the way towards fiction. Every chapter of this book can be read as a journal entry embroidered by a common thematic thread, that is, a life in a new language. Yet, despite the fact that the book is described as a linguistic autobiography, a fictional drive surfaces occasionally in its warp and weft.

In the chapter "The Renunciation", Lahiri refers to the two-faced Janus, "the ancient god of the threshold, of beginnings and endings" (2016: 39), a Roman god that represents a moment of transition. As already explained, the book itself is a metaphor of the author's self-translation into Italian. Yet, transition no less significant takes place in this book when the author produces her first piece of fiction in Italian. It comes as no surprise that the first fictional chapter in this book, that is, "The Exchange", follows two chapters named "The Diary" and "The Story". In "The Diary", Lahiri tells us that the second night after their arrival in Rome they could not open their house's door. Once the door was opened by a locksmith, a symbolic gate was also unlocked since that very day the author decided to start writing a diary in Italian. In turn, in "The Story" Lahiri sheds light on this transition towards fiction that is already taking place in this book:

> The diary provides me with the discipline, the habit of writing in Italian. […] What I express there remains a private, interior narration. At a certain point, in spite of the risk, I want to go out. […] I try to focus on something specific: a person, a moment, a place. […] such fragments are the first steps to take before constructing a story. I think that a writer should observe the real world before imagining a nonexistent one. (2016: 61)

This passage can be read as an instance of Lahiri's own poetics, as it sketches the author's ideas on the craft of writing. It is worth noting that the author prioritises the observation of the real world in order to illuminate an imagined, non-existent one. Surprisingly, this imaginary world created by a writer echoes the non-existential world the author aspires to illuminate through translation, which reinforces Lahiri's conception of "writing and translating as two aspects of the same activity" (Lahiri 2022: 8). Moreover, as Bergantino has aptly noted, "The Story" thematises the transit from diaristic and self-referential writing in Italian to her first narrative attempt to write fiction in this language. Hence, we can gradually observe how the transit from autobiographical writing to fiction takes place. In turn, "The Exchange" not only signals Lahiri's first narrative attempt in Italian but can also be considered as an instance of transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 941).

The fictional thematisation of translation in literature was widely explored in the collection of essays that compose *Transfiction* (Kaindl 2014: 4). The term transfiction was defined as an "aestheticized imagination of translatorial action" (Spitzl 2014: 364). The pervasive fictional representations of translation and translators in literature saw a boom in the 1980s (Kaindl 2012: 145). According to Pérez-Carbonell (2018: 614), the increase of this portrayal of fictional translators and interpreters in literature can be explained by the fact that translators and interpreters epitomise a certain kind of 'in-betweenness' (Bassnett 2002: 3). In this vein, Kaindl's definition of translators and interpreters as "individuals who are constantly in motion […] due to their constant movement between languages and cultures" (Kaindl 2014: 3) resonates strongly with Jhumpa Lahiri's literary trajectory. Lahiri has claimed that "almost all my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive" (2002: 119). It could be argued that this in-betweenness does not only apply to Lahiri's characters but also to the author herself, as her first book in Italian exemplifies.

Whereas Lahiri's work in English aspires to offer a cultural translation of India (Lahiri 2002), her work in Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self (Frigeni 2020: 107; Bergantino 2023). This is particularly evident in Lahiri's first fictional story in Italian, "The Exchange". As an example of transfiction, this story amplifies what she narrates in the non-fictional chapters of *In Other Words* (Bergantino 2023: 941). The protagonist of "The Exchange" is a female "translator, who wanted to be another person" (Lahiri 2016: 67), someone who considers herself imperfect "like the draft of a book" (67). Admittedly, the story has an autobiographical imprint and addresses one of the main thematic concerns of this book, namely, the desire to be another person via translation. The story further provides a portrayal of a fictional translator which is easy to identify with Lahiri herself (Bergantino 2023: 941). As the story develops, a third-person narrator tells us that the protagonist has lost her black sweater during a private clothes sale in Rome. According to Lahiri's own analysis of this story, "the sweater is language" (2016: 65). At the end of the chapter the female translator recovers her black sweater, yet when she puts it on she feels that "This sweater was no longer the same, no longer the one she'd been looking for. When she saw it, she no longer felt revulsion. In fact, when she put it on, she preferred it. She didn't want to find the one she had lost, she didn't miss it. Now, when she put it on, she, too, was another" (Lahiri 2016: 81).

The black sweater is one more instance of how metaphors channel Jhumpa Lahiri's self-translation into Italian. The sweater both stands as a metaphor of language and symbolises her desire to be another person through the act of translation. It is worth reminding both metaphor and translation's common etymology since they inextricably drive this story's narrative arc. Moreover, this symbolic representation of loss and renewal through translation that is conveyed in "The Exchange" echoes Walter Benjamin's notion of 'afterlife' (*Fortleben*) in the very terms he used in his seminal essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923): "in its afterlife — which could not be called that if it were not the transformation and renewal of something living, the original undergoes a change" (Benjamin 2004: 77). Admittedly, the afterlife of Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional translator lives on *in other words*, which actually mirrors the author's genuine aspiration throughout this linguistic autobiography. Thus, as an instance of transfiction, "The Exchange" propels the author's life events and ambitions into the realm of fiction (Bergantino 2023: 947).

"The Diary", "The Story" and "The Exchange" epitomise the kind of (trans) fictional turn that takes place within Lahiri's autobiographical writing. In other words, they outline a key transition in Lahiri's book, one in which the author gradually ventures into uncharted fictional territory. This fictional turn occurs only twice in *In Other Words*. Surprisingly, the closing chapter of this book, "Half-light", is the second short piece of fiction that the author produces, a "formidable door […] that remains ajar" (Lahiri 2022: 14), foreshadowing a new literary path which has crystallised to date in three more books in Italian: *Dove mi trovo* (2018) [*Whereabouts* (2021)], *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021) and *Racconti Romani* (2022) [*Roman Stories* (2023)].

5. Concluding Remarks

Both ectopic and translingual authors reshape our understanding of world literature and adumbrate new cultural mappings. Thus, Lahiri's switch from English to Italian stands as a prime example of both ectopic and translingual writing. In the words of the author, “the arrival of Italian, the third point on my linguistic journey, creates a triangle” (2016: 153). An emblem of Lahiri’s hybrid identity, the figure of the triangle embodies the negotiation that takes place in Lahiri’s self-translation into Italian. Hence, the Italian language may be seen as a *third space* (Bhabha 1994; Lutzoni 2017) where Lahiri’s linguistic and identitarian journey seems to culminate.

Lahiri’s literary production manifests a translative consciousness. In her 2002 essay “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation”, she claimed that her English fiction staged a dialogue between Bengali and English (Bergantino 2023: 937). Thus, Lahiri’s “perplexing bicultural universe” crystallised in stories that aspired to offer an ongoing cultural translation of India (Lahiri 2002: 114). However, while Lahiri’s preoccupation with cultural translation is a central theme in her English fiction, the author’s wish to be translated into Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self.

Concomitantly, in this article I have examined the role of metaphors in Lahiri’s *In Other Words*. According to the author, metaphors are the cornerstone of this book, as they account for how the author’s thinking unfolded while writing the work (2022). Thus, I contend that metaphors drive the author’s self-translation into Italian. In light of Lahiri’s reliance on metaphor, it could be argued that she deals with translation metaphorically. Hence, Lahiri’s metaphorical migration into Italian marks the decisive role that translation plays in the author’s poetics.

Finally, I have analysed the fictional thematisation of translation in Lahiri’s first fictional story in Italian, “The Exchange”. Admittedly, by means of transfiction, this fictional piece amplifies the translingual experience that is narrated in the non-fictional chapters of Lahiri’s linguistic autobiography (Bergantino 2023: 941). Lahiri’s projection of the self onto the realm of fiction lets us consider “The Exchange” as an example of self-transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 947). Thus, the interplay between Lahiri’s self-translation and transfiction forges a new understanding of the existing links between translation, transfiction and life-writing. Moreover, “The Exchange” enacts the symbolic rendition of loss and renewal through translation that drives Jhumpa Lahiri’s linguistic journey. Yet, the author’s wish to be translated into Italian “cannot dissipate awareness of an unavoidable untranslatability” (Pireddu 2021: 898) as Lahiri herself states in her book: “This Italian project of mine makes me acutely aware of the immense distances between languages” (2016: 91).

Jhumpa Lahiri claims that “to be a writer-translator is to value both being and becoming” (2022: 7). As a writer-translator, Lahiri epitomises a certain kind of ‘in-betweenness’. It is in the interstices of this in-between space where she struggles to dwell. According to the author, she has always lived on the margins of countries and cultures: "a peripheral zone where it's impossible for me to feel rooted […] the only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong" (2016: 93). In Lahiri's *In Other Words* the wish to become another person via (self-)translation is a consequence of this author's "nomadic homelessness" (Pireddu 2021: 899). Thus, through the act of translating herself into Italian, Jhumpa Lahiri trespasses on an elusive and uncharted territory and lets us glimpse the workings of that act of self-translation while writing on the threshold.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of the research project "Transferences in literature and discourse. Poetics, Rhetoric and Comparative Perspectives. Theoretical construction of a Transferential Critique". Reference: PID2023-148361NB-I00, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain and the European Union. Acknowledgements are owed to Harvard University for allowing access to library sources during my funded research stay at this university (July-August 2024).

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Conrad's case has been cited by the Chinese-born American writer Ha Jin as the founding father of the so-called migrant-writer literary tradition (Jin 2010: 461; Ibáñez 2020: 84).

2. Albaladejo has proposed the following open typology of ectopic literature based on authors and works: "1. Ectopic literature written in the language of the target place by authors who have moved from their place of origin. [...] 2. Ectopic literature written in their own language by authors who have moved from their places of origin to places where their language is usually spoken. [...] 3. Ectopic literature written in their own language by authors who have moved to places whose language is different from their native one. [...] 4. Ectopic literature by authors who have moved and write in a language that is different from their own native language but which is also different from the usual language of the target place" (Albaladejo 2019: 403-404).

Works Cited

Albaladejo, Tomás. 2011. "Sobre la literatura ectópica". In Bieniec, Adrian, Szilvia Lengl, Sandrine Okou and Natalia Shchyhlebska (eds.) *Rem tene, verba sequentur! Gelebte Interkulturalität. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag des Wissenschaftlers und Dichters Carmine/Gino Chiellino*. Thelem: 141-153.

Albaladejo, Tomás. 2019. "European Crisis, Fragmentation and Cohesion: The Contribution of Ectopic Literature to Europeanness". *Journal of European Studies* 49 (3-4): 394-409. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0047244119859152>.

Albaladejo, Tomás. 2023. "Discurso retórico, discurso literario y arte de lenguaje: un modelo teórico translacional de fundamentación retórico-cultural e interdiscursiva". *Rétor* 13 (1): 1-18. <http://doi.org/10.61146/retor.v13.n1.188>.

Amezcua Gómez, David. 2014. "Vivir en la traducción: *Lost in Translation* de Eva Hoffman". *Dialogía. Revista de Lingüística, Literatura y Cultura* 8: 71-87. <https://journals.uio.no/Dialogia/issue/view/107/15>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

Amezcua Gómez, David. 2016. "La noción de *tercer país* en *Borderlands/La frontera* como metáfora de la escritura transfronteriza de Gloria Anzaldúa". *Actio Nova. Revista de Teoría de la literatura y literatura comparada* 0: 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.15366/actionova2016.0.001>.

Amezcua Gómez, David and Consuelo Martínez Moraga. 2022. "Mudarse a otra lengua: desplazamiento, traducción y metáfora en «En otras palabras» de Jhumpa Lahiri". *Castilla. Estudios de Literatura* 13: 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.24197/cel.13.2022.1-23>.

Arduini, Stefano. 2007. "Metaphors, Concepts, Cognition". In *Metaphors.* Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura: 7-16.

Arndt, Susan, Dirk Naguschewski and Robert Stockhammer. (eds.) 2011. *Exophonie.* Kulturverlag Kadmos.

Ashcroft, Bill. 2010. "Globalization, Transnation and Utopia". In Goebel, Walter and Saskia Schabio (eds.) *Locating Transnational Ideals.* Routledge: 13-29.

Bassnett, Susan. 2002. *Translation studies.* Routledge.

Benjamin, Walter. 2004. "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux Parisiens". In Venuti, Lawrence (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader.* Trans. S. Rendall. Routledge: 75-85.

Bergantino, Andrea. 2023. "Translators and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Transfiction". *Perspectives. Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 31 (5): 935-949. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2022.2118614>.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* Routledge.

Damrosch, David. 2020. *Comparing the Literatures. Literary Studies in a Global Age.* Princeton U.P.

De Donno, Fabrizio. 2021. "Translingual Affairs of World Literature. Rootlessness and Romance in Jhumpa Lahiri and Yoko Tawada". *Journal of World Literature* 6: 103-122. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-20201005>.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1990. *Kafka: por una literatura menor.* Trans. J. Aguilar Mora. Era.

Forceville, Charles. 2011. "The Journey Metaphor and the Source-Path-Goal Schema. Agnès Varda's Autobiographical Gleaning Documentaries". In Fludernik, Monika (ed.) *Beyond Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Perspectives on Literary Metaphor.* Routledge: 281-297.

Frigeni, Veronica. 2020. "L'italiano perturbante di Jhumpa Lahiri". *Italian Studies* 75 (1): 99-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2020.1688521>.

Gong, Haomin. 2014. "Language, Migrancy, and the Literal: Ha Jin's Translation Literature". *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 40 (1): 147-167. <10.6240/concentric.lit.2014.40.1.08>.

Hellín Nistal, Lucía. 2015. "Literatura ectópica: Party im Blitz de Elias Canetti". *Tonos: Revista de Estudios Filológicos* 28. <http://www.tonosdigital.com/ojs/index.php/tonos/article/view/1224>. Accessed October 4, 2024.

Hoffman, Eva. 1989. *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language.* E.P. Dutton.

Hutton, Margaret-Anne. 2023. "Reflections on the 'Trans' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (*In altre parole*)". *Italian Studies* 78 (4): 500-512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2023.2261832>.

Ibáñez, José R. 2016. "'All the Guns Must Have the Same Caliber:' A Kachruvian Study of Ha Jin's *Chineseness* in 'Winds and Clouds over a Funeral'". *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 42 (2): 195-220. <10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.2.11>.

Ibáñez, José R. 2020. "(In)Hospitable Languages and Linguistic Hospitality in Hyphenated American Literature: The Case of Ha Jin". In Gerke, Amanda Ellen, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan and Patricia San José (eds.) *The Poetics and Politics of Hospitality in US Literature and Culture*. Brill/Rodopi: 77-93. <10.1163/9789004408043_006>.

Indurkhya, Bipin. 1992. *Metaphor and Cognition: An Interactionist Approach.* Kluwer.

Indurkhya, Bipin. 2007. "Rationality and Reasoning with Metaphors". *New Ideas in Psychology* 25: 16-36.

Jin, Ha. 2008. *The Writer as Migrant*. University of Chicago Press.

Jin, Ha. 2010. "In Defence of Foreignness". In Kirkpatrick, Andy (ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*. Routledge: 461-470.

Kaindl, Klaus. 2012. "Representations of Translators and Interpreters". In Gambier, Yves and Luc van Doorslaer (eds.) *Handbook of Translation Studies.* John Benjamins: 145-150. <doi:10.1075/hts.1>.

Kaindl, Klaus. 2014. "Going Fictional! Translators and Interpreters in Literature and Film". In Kaindl, Klaus and Karlheinz Spitzl (eds.) Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction. John Benjamins: 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.110>.

Kellman, Steven. 2000. *The Translingual Imagination.* Nebraska U.P.

Kellman, Steven. 2017. "Jhumpa Lahiri Goes Italian". *New England Review* 38 (2): 121-126. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ner.2017.0046>.

Kellman, Steven. 2019. "Literary Translingualism: What and Why?". *Polylinguality and Transcultural Practices* 16 (3): 337-346. <10.22363/2618-897X-2019-16-3-337-346>.

Kramsch, Claire. 2009. *The Multilingual Subject: What Foreign Language Learners Say about their Experience and Why it Matters.* Oxford U.P.

Kristeva, Julia. 1974. *El texto de la novela.* Trans. J. Llovet. Lumen.

Kristeva, Julia. 1976. "Semanálisis y producción de sentido". In Greimas, Algirdas J. (ed.) *Ensayos de semiótica poética.* Trans. C. de Fez and A. Rallo. Planeta: 274-306.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2002. “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation”. In Nair, Rukmini Bhaya (ed.) *Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India.* Sage: 113-120.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2011. “Reflections: Trading Stories, Notes from an Apprenticeship”. *The New Yorker* (June 6). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/06/13/trading-stories>. Accessed March 26, 2026.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2016. *In Other Words.* Trans. A. Goldstein. Knopf.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2022. *Translating Myself and Others.* Princeton U.P.

Lakoff, George. 1993. *Metaphor and Thought.* Cambridge U.P.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By.* University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George and Mark Turner. 1989. *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor.* University of Chicago Press.

Luarsabishvili, Vladimer. 2013. “Literatura ectópica y literatura del exilio: apuntes teóricos”. *Castilla. Estudios de literatura* 4: 19-38. <https://revistas.uva.es/index.php/castilla/article/view/161/161>. Accessed June 1, 2023.

Lutzoni, Silvia. 2017. “Jhumpa Lahiri and the Grammar of a Multi-Layered Identity”. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38 (1): 108-118. <10.1080/07256868.2016.1269062>.

Pérez-Carbonell, Marta. 2018. “Who Said What? Translated Messages and Language Interpreters in Three Texts by Javier Marías and Almudenas Grandes”. *Perspectives. Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 26 (4): 612-623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2017.1388414>.

Pireddu, Nicoletta. 2021. “Jhumpa Lahiri: Between Longing and Belonging”. *Comparative Literature Studies* 58 (4): 891-907. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/820445>. Accessed July 4, 2024.

Power, Arthur. 1974. *Conversations with James Joyce.* Millington.

Pujante, David. 2016. “Constructivist Rhetoric within the Tradition of Rhetorical Studies in Spain”. *Res Rhetorica* 3 (1): 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.17380/rr2016.1.3>.

Pujante, David. 2017. “The Discursive Construction of Reality in the Context of Rhetoric: Constructivist Rhetoric”. In Morales-López, Esperanza and Alan Floyd (eds.) *Developing New Identities in Social Conflicts: Constructivist Perspectives.* John Benjamins: 41-65.

Richards, I.A. 1986. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford U.P.

Ruiz-Sánchez, Ana. 2005. “Desterritorialización y literatura: literaturas de exilio y migración en la era de la globalización”. *Migraciones y Exilios: Cuadernos de la Asociación para el Estudio de los Exilios y Migraciones Ibéricos Contemporáneos* 6: 101-111.

Said, Edward. 1999. *Out of Place. A Memoir*. Granta.

Siskind, Mariano. 2012. “The Genres of World Literature: The Case of Magical Realism”. In Dhaen, Theo, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to World Literature.* Routledge: 345-355.

Spitzl, Karlheinz. 2014. “Fiction as a Catalyst. Some Afterthoughts”. In Kaindl, Klaus and Karlheinz Spitzl (eds.) *Transfiction. Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction.* John Benjamins: 363-368.

Vidal Claramonte, M. Carmen África. 2014. “Translating Hybrid Literatures from Hostipitality to Hospitality”. *European Journal of English Studies* 18 (3): 242-262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2014.945800>.

Tabucchi, Antonio. 1994. *Requiem: A Hallucination.* Trans. M. Jull Costa. New Directions.

ZHANG, Hang. 2002. “Bilingual Creativity in Chinese English: Ha Jin’s *In the Pond*”. *World Englishes: Journal of English as an International and Intranational Language* 21 (2): 305-315.

Received: 18/12/2024
Accepted: 08/01/2026

DARKNESS AND DISORDER INSIDE HIM: IAN MCGUIRE'S *THE ABSTAINER* AS NEO-VICTORIAN CRIME FICTION

OSCURIDAD Y DESORDEN EN SU INTERIOR: *THE ABSTAINER* DE IAN MCGUIRE COMO FICCIÓN CRIMINAL NEO-VICTORIANA

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611437

PETR CHALUPSKÝ
Charles University, Prague
petr.chalupsky@pedf.cuni.cz
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6759-0496

Abstract

Like its 2016 breakthrough predecessor, *The North Water*, *The Abstainer* (2016), Ian McGuire's latest novel, is set in Victorian England. It features a serial killer, a flawed detective protagonist in pursuit of the villain and a final thriller-like encounter between them. However, the genre of its narration differs —revolving around a police detective chasing a criminal— and so do the psychological profiles of the pursuer and the pursued, the motivation behind their acts and the mood of the story's resolution. Moreover, the employment of central adversaries who are, to some extent, similar to each other challenges a clear-cut borderline between good and evil, right and wrong. This article thus argues that, by subverting the generic schemes of the Victorian detective novel, raising ethical questions concerning the gulf between Self and Other, and addressing concerns relevant to present-day readers' sensibility, *The Abstainer* represents a noteworthy contribution to the body of contemporary Neo-Victorian crime fiction.

Keywords: Ian McGuire, *The Abstainer*, detective fiction, neo-Victorian fiction, ethics.

Resumen

Como su obra precedente más famosa, *The North Water* (2016), *The Abstainer* (2020), la novela más reciente hasta la fecha de Ian McGuire, se ambienta en la Inglaterra victoriana. La obra presenta a un asesino en serie, a un detective protagonista —marcado por sus propias imperfecciones— que persigue al villano, y al encuentro final entre ambos con tintes de thriller. No obstante, el género de la narración difiere —al centrarse en la persecución de un criminal por parte de un detective— y también lo hacen los perfiles psicológicos de las figuras del perseguidor y del culpable, la motivación que impulsa sus actos y el tono de la resolución de la historia. Además, la inclusión de dos adversarios centrales que, en cierta medida, comparten rasgos similares cuestiona la existencia de una frontera nítida entre el bien y el mal, lo correcto y lo incorrecto. Este artículo sostiene que, al subvertir los esquemas genéricos de la novela detectivesca victoriana, esta novela plantea interrogantes éticos determinantes en torno al abismo existente entre el yo y el otro, y aborda cuestiones relevantes para la sensibilidad de los lectores contemporáneos. De esta manera, se puede concluir que *The Abstainer* constituye una aportación destacada al corpus de la ficción criminal neo-victoriana actual.

Palabras clave: Ian McGuire, *The Abstainer*, novela policíaca, ficción neo-victoriana, ética.

1. Introduction: Victorian Detectives, Detective Fiction and The Abstainer's Historical Authenticity

Although Ian McGuire (b. 1964) started his writing career in 2006 with a satirical campus novel, *Incredible Bodies,* it was his second novel, *The North Water*, released ten years later and longlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize, which won him recognition, not only among critics and readers, but also in academic circles.[1] In fact, he appears to have found 'his' medium in the genre of historical fiction, since his subsequent novel, *The Abstainer* (2020), is also set in the second half of the 19th century and, against the backdrop of real historical events, tells a fictitious story exploring various undersides of English life during the Victorian era.[2]

Besides the historical setting, *The Abstainer* shares other aspects with *The North Water*: it focuses on the underside of Victorian social life; it revolves around a series of murders that determine the course of the novel's action; its main setting is a place McGuire is well familiar with — Manchester, where he has lived most of his adult life;[3] the protagonist, although standing on the side of good, displays a flawed personality, haunted by his past misdeeds and prone to further wrongdoing; the central conflict between good and evil brings up ethical questions surrounding the protagonist's decisions and acts; and the thriller-like nature of this conflict involves a journey to a remote environment, namely to Pennsylvania, in the United States. However, *The Abstainer* is a different book from its predecessor as, in the first place, it is crime fiction, its protagonist being a police inspector who is investigating a case involving the Manchester

Irish Republican Brotherhood's clandestine activities. Also, the novel's main antagonist embodies a different kind of evil than the monstrous Henry Drax in *The North Water*, and it offers a less consoling resolution. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that, through its parallels between the man of law and the criminal, its ambiguously drawn borderline between good and evil and, consequently, between success and failure, and a distinct ethical dimension resulting from extreme forms of relation between the Self and the Other, *The Abstainer* addresses related present-day concerns, thus representing an enriching contribution to the body of neo-Victorian crime fiction.

The emergence of crime fiction as a distinct genre in England during the 1880s and 90s was a logical consequence of the development of the detective profession. Detective departments were established in England as independent branches of standard police forces during the Victorian era. With their growth in size, the rise of forensic science and the advancement of investigation methods and procedures, by the end of the Edwardian period police detectives came to be recognised as professionals whose reputation was comparable with that of their most renowned continental colleagues (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 4-8). The genre produced the comforting image of a rational crime-fighter always ready to confront trespassers of societal limits, and to restore order out of insecurity and disarray. At the same time, it created the figure of the villain —the criminal— as an embodiment of a threat to social order. Although the Victorians were already familiar with the figure of the "fallible hero" (Poore 2017: 3), it was used rather scarcely in the detective fiction published at that time.

The development of regional detective departments, with their members lacking in equipment and schooling, was much slower than in London. Therefore, provincial officers unable to solve a case turned to the Yarders for help, though often unwillingly and belatedly. A significant catalyst for Scotland Yard's becoming an epitome of the country's competence in fighting crime was the formation of the Special Branch, originally called the Irish Branch or Irish Brigade, in March 1883 — a special unit dealing with politically motivated criminal activity. The main impetus behind this step was the escalation of the Irish national movement's radical activities in London and larger provincial cities in the early 1880s, when "Irish extremists embarked on an intensive and indiscriminate campaign of terror on the British mainland, mainly concocted in the USA" (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 53).[4] However, the formation of the Special Branch was not enthusiastically welcomed by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials who were "unhappy with the expense involved, especially the cost of paying informers" and considered the deployment of clandestine methods as an unnecessary abandoning of the national tradition in favour of the "Continental system" (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 55).

The Abstainer is set against the backdrop of a real historical event, since it opens with the 1867 public hanging of the so-called Manchester Martyrs, who attacked a police van in order to free two leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood transported inside. The three men arrested were found guilty of a policeman's murder and sentenced to death. The outrage triggered by these Fenians' execution generates much of the plotline in the novel. The complicated case of the Brotherhood's retaliation for the three martyrs' lives offers the protagonist — the police detective James O'Connor— an opportunity to distinguish himself and atone for his past professional failure. The novel is pure fiction, but it demonstrates its author's intense struggle for a realistic and authentic historical depiction of Victorian England.

This way, the novel echoes the aforementioned tendencies: it is set in a period between the formation of detective branches outside London in the second half of the 1840s and the violent outburst of the Irish nationalist campaign in the first half of the 1880s; it faithfully depicts the environment of a provincial detective department; and it anticipates the need for a specialised unit to fight against organised crime. The novel's Manchester CID is a small squad whose methods are still closer to those of standard uniformed policemen than of trained undercover specialists. With his progressive approach, the Head Constable James O'Connor is a rare exception who understands the importance of a network of reliable informers for uncovering clandestine plotting by politically motivated criminal groups. His superiors and colleagues, however, scorn the informers, taking them as "parasites" (McGuire 2020: 8) who can hardly be trusted, only very reluctantly grant O'Connor funds to compensate informants for their services, and do not pursue leads from these informants seriously enough. The department is thus shown as ill-prepared to cope with organised crime, particularly when the local radicals start to cooperate with their American associates. Therefore, when O'Connor fails professionally and the main culprit manages to flee, Inspector Thompson from Scotland Yard is called up to take charge of the detective division. Also, the depicted operations of the Irish nationalists, spread throughout the United Kingdom and the United States, foreshadow their more menacing acts in the later years of the century.

2. Non-Normative and Ethical Neo-Victorian Subjects

For over three decades, neo-Victorian fiction's diversity and popularity have continued to prove that "the Victorians continue to have (multifarious, contradictory, contested) meaning(s) in our culture" (Mitchell 2010: 62). This genre strives to provide an alternative and non-normative view of the Victorian era, its ethos, values, aesthetic and its people's frame of mind, being thus intentionally engaged "with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4), and contesting the stereotypical images of the period. That is why certain aspects of popular culture, such as detective and sensation fiction, have been playing "an increasingly prominent role in neo-Victorian critical debate" (Cox 2019: 7). Recent neo-Victorian fiction has attempted to reinsert historical characters into a realistic context which, however, anticipates and/or echoes the current world by examining "both the continuities and discontinuities between the Victorian past and the present" (Hadley 2010: 14). This is a dual, dialogical relationship that aspires more than merely to bring the Victorians back to life: rather, its intended outcome is to offer "productive and nuanced ways of unlocking occluded secrets, silences and mysteries" (Arias and Pulham 2009: xx) and, by doing so, to shed more light on the undercurrents of our social life.

By rediscovering overlooked histories that reveal that various forms of deviant behaviour did exist in the Victorian age, these texts present the Victorians as "our sometimes uncomfortable (and unforeseen) mirror image" (Tomaiuolo 2018: 3). The genre naturally embraces images of violence and villainy, and law-breaking is one of the subject matters neo-Victorianism likes to address. Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that there is a close association between historical fiction and detective work resting "in the similarities in the gathering of evidence and the search for the new (and hopefully correct) interpretation of that material" (2010: 16). This association is particularly strong in the neo-Victorian case, as this fiction often entails a process of revelation of what has been withheld and concealed, and it was in the 19th century that the genre of the detective story emerged. Moreover, the "displacement of murder and mystery" to a historical setting allows these criminal cases to "generate a different kind of fascination" and thus provoke less disquieting emotions in the reader (Cox 2019: 99). Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz also views the narrative of detection as a highly appropriate vehicle for neo-Victorian fiction, as they both combine "the quest for order, reason, and understanding, on the one hand, and the fascination with enigma, fantasy, and horror, on the other" (2017: 45), no matter how illusory such imposition of order and meaning ultimately is.

By rewriting the lesser-known and taboo aspects of the era, neo-Victorian fiction aims higher than to sensationally disclose the scandalous misdemeanours of the 'virtuous' Victorians. It strives to provide its readers with an opportunity to reflect upon themselves by showing that not only important developments, but also many of our collective traumas and anxieties were shaped during the second half of the 19th century. Another reason that undermines the misconception of neo-Victorian literature as sensation-seeking modern penny dreadfuls is its ethical focus that allows it to "acquire the capacity 'to speak-for-the-other'" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010a: 20). Historical narration in general may function as an effective medium for an examination of contemporary ethical concerns by means of historical parallel and analogy, "taking people in the past as 'ethical subjects' — entitled to the same consideration for their actions and perspectives as we would hope to receive for our own" (Andress 1998: 240). Historical fiction thus speaks of and for the other through which the contemporary self, in accordance with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, "is enlarged and enriched by the other and transcends its own egoistic limits" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010a: 20). For Levinas, the ethical relation is "concrete and personal. It is first and foremost an encounter with a face" (Gibson 2001: 63). Encountering and responding to (the face of) the other is to acknowledge the priority of this infinite and unmasterable otherness through an act of selfless giving. This generosity is carried out primarily through language, talking to the other without bias and preconception, which means refusing "to reduce the other to terms, to greet him or her in his or her difference" (Gibson 2001: 64). With its non-normative other, neo-Victorian fiction goes even further: it not only invites the readers to reassess their own identity and existence in the light of moral doubts and resolutions of the fictitious Victorians-like-ourselves, but also makes them aware of the extreme forms of otherness and raises "the ethical question of the limits of the human" (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 67), particularly as regards how to adequately respond to otherness and doing so in a way that defies the prevailing conception of humane behaviour.

3. Evil, Villainy and Neo-Victorian Crime Fiction

What makes one disposed to evil is their propensity to submit to what Simone Weil terms "moral gravity" (in Dilman 2005: 131), which leads them to prioritise their own needs over a stance of moral responsibility towards the other. As this propensity varies from one person to another, evil is far from a uniform category. We can distinguish between 'pure' and 'instrumental' evil: pure evil means "malice for its own sake" (McGinn 2003: 63), being motivated by and deriving pleasure from causing pain and suffering. Instrumental evil refers to using malice "as a means to achieving some other goal" (63), that is, one's own benefit rather than the other's pain is the primary motive. While the latter follows a certain causal logic, the former tends to defy understanding and rational conceptualisation other than that of a manifestation of one's personal dispositions (Arenas 2011: 18). These evils meet the criteria of villainy. However, there is one special form of evil that exceeds this classification —monstrosity— which involves pathological inability to resist one's physiological needs and desires. The difference between a villain and a monster is that the villain is "self-aware" and knowingly breaks the rules (Poore 2017: 20, 22), whereas monsters "react rather than rationally act" (Porter 2010: 544), unable to contemplate the consequences of their acts for others.

Neo-Victorian crime fiction has embraced all the above forms of evil and villainy, thus catering to our simultaneous revulsion against and fascination with criminals and their depravities. It may be taken as a response to metaphysical detective fiction, also known as anti-detective fiction, which, though first conceptualised in the early 1940s, gradually developed into a "distinctly postmodernist genre" (Arnautou 2019: 292). Metaphysical detective fiction "parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions" (Merivale and Sweeney 1999: 2), particularly the belief that reason and the analytical method can always untangle all mysteries, reveal the truth and solve the case, thus replacing the chaos caused by an unexplained crime with order. Metaphysical detective fiction reverses these expectations by violating the essential cause-and-effect principle of crime narratives and questioning the very possibility of finding out what happened. The borderline between the two constitutive storylines —that of the crime and that of the investigation— becomes blurred as there is "a flow between commission and investigation of the crime, if indeed a crime has been committed at all" (Kravitz 2013: 46). Instead of the conventional reassuring effect, the reader is provided with a sense of uncertainty, meaninglessness and absence of resolution and satisfactory closure. The genre is thus "not a continuation of but rather a 'transgression' against detective fiction" (Tani in Kravitz 2013: 47), whose purpose is, in accordance with the postmodernist preoccupation with metanarrative concerns, to reactivate the readers' "flabby habits of perception" (Holquist 1983: 173) at the cost of an insight into the detective's and the perpetrator's psychology.

By contrast, contemporary detective stories set in the Victorian era appear to saturate the readers' nostalgic longing to revisit a comforting past, such as that offered by the early and Golden Age detective stories, where the crime is solved, the evil eliminated, and the victims avenged (Krawczyk-Żywko 2017: 5-6). However, this claim should not be pushed too far, as neo-Victorian crime fiction tends to challenge the archetypes of traditional crime narratives whose criminal actions are driven by motives such as greed, revenge, jealousy and rage. Christiana Gregoriou distinguishes three modern criminal archetypes contemporary crime fiction readers are likely to expect: the "Born Evil" or the "Monster", innately evil and deviant since birth; the "Made Evil" or the "Vampire", whose actions are conditioned and/or justified mostly by means of their possibly traumatic childhood experiences; and the "Born and Made Evil" or the "Spoilt Child", whose actions are presented as both conditioned and innate, and who fail to take responsibility for their acts, acting abnormally because they find it thrilling and because they enjoy violating societal norms (2007: 111-117). Moreover, contemporary crime writers often make the villain human-like through psychological insight and personal history, by which they are "in fact demystifying their criminal behaviour; they are justifying it, or putting readers in the position of sympathising with the criminal" (Gregoriou 2007: 90). Such a character loses some of the evil aura as their acts call for understanding explanation, and these stories thus violate what Benjamin Poore terms the "villain effect" (2017: 34). Consequently, the boundaries between the criminal and the investigator, and sometimes the victim as well, become indistinct as they all are shown to be prone to violent and ethically questionable responses under certain circumstances.

4. The Fallible Man of Law and the Undemonised Outlaw in The Abstainer

In *The Abstainer*, James O'Connor is essentially a decent and honest person who is haunted by his past failure and its consequences. His heavy drinking, a consequence of his tragic loss of a child and wife within the period of two years, costs him his position as a respected police detective in Dublin, although his superior gives him a last chance by arranging a secondment transfer to Manchester for him. Joining the Manchester police force is his final attempt to restart his professional career and restore his personal life, "to escape the darkness and disorder of the past" (McGuire 2020: 200). In O'Connor, McGuire creates an erring protagonist, a police inspector who is chasing a culprit as much as he is chasing away the shadows of his gloomy past, whose predicaments and path to moral awakening are shaped by highly convoluted circumstances.

As Christine Lehnen points out, O'Connor is a liminal protagonist who, being an Irishman working for the police of the British Empire, "straddles the identities of both coloniser and colonised" (2024: 2-3). His position in the Manchester detective squad is far from easy and pleasing. In spite of his reputation as an expert on the Irish question, he is often exposed to a mixture of disrespect and disdain from his colleagues and superiors because of his Irish origin. He has grown to endure this, as there is "nothing much to be gained by speaking out […] but plenty to be lost" (McGuire 2020: 9), but he cannot help but wonder at their ignorant self-importance. They pay little heed to what he tells them about the Irish nationalists' mentality, feeling they know 'their' Fenians better than some outlander from Dublin, assuming that all Irishmen are alike, those wearing a police badge included. He fails in his attempt to explain to them that displays of uncompromising force against the Irish Brotherhood do more harm than good since they only create martyrs out of murderers, realising that, blinded by their conceitedness and prejudice, his fellow officers might never learn their lesson. The massive funeral parade held a week after the public execution only confirms O'Connor's beliefs, and he correctly interprets it as a "reminder that the hangings haven't cowed them" (McGuire 2020: 32), a portent of retaliatory counterstrike to come. This and other mentions of excessive and publicly visible violent measures used against nationalist fundamentalists can be read as a more general commentary on the harmfulness of such policies in the long run, no matter how attractive and effective they may appear to the uninformed populace. By disregarding the complex causalities behind terrorist acts, individuals behind these measures only intensify the tension between those who feel themselves oppressed and their alleged oppressors, which often results in their members' further radicalisation.

Although O'Connor struggles to appear oblivious and calm in his job, knowing how precarious his position within the department is, the actual state of his psyche is far from even-tempered. On the one hand, he is exiled from his home to an unfamiliar, unfriendly environment, while on the other, he knows that it gives him an opportunity to start afresh and free himself from his demons. Yet he keeps pondering "how long this balancing act can last and how it will end" (McGuire 2020: 35). First, his anger at how he is treated by his colleagues intensifies to the degree that he no longer feels in charge of his work. Second, the burdensome past is always at his heels, provoking in him feelings of insecurity and traumatic recollections. And so, when three of his informers and a fellow detective are killed and his superior blackmails O'Connor into using his own nephew to infiltrate the leading circles of the Fenian group, suggesting wilfully that the casualties are his fault anyway, O'Connor can bear it no more and resorts to drink. The alcohol releases in him the frustrations from "being pushed aside, passed over as if [he is] nothing" (McGuire 2020: 214), and he decides to disobey the order and follow his own lead in the case. However, his good intentions are gradually drowned in drink and self-pity, and his fatal neglect of duty prevents him from monitoring the prime suspects and, in consequence, from saving his nephew's life.

At first sight, O'Connor seems to be a figure from modern detective stories and crime thrillers: he is a loner, somewhat eccentric in the eyes of his colleagues, at odds with his superiors' conviction and demands, who eventually defies the authorities and takes the case into his own hands. On closer look, however, O'Connor does not fit into this 'lone wolf' category because he is not comfortable with the role assigned to him by the whims of fate. He is solitary because he finds himself in a hostile world. He does not enjoy being taken as an oddity; his opinions and methods are not unorthodox, but rather stem from his expertise, experience and intuition; and his seniors' disapproval is indicative of their own narrow-mindedness rather than of his eccentricity. And he only resolves to ignore the investigation procedure because he is drunk and frustrated, which he comes to regret once he sobers and becomes aware of the impact of his decision. He is a type of neo-Victorian detective who is, in the first place, a relatable human being with strengths and weaknesses —one who keeps on struggling with life in spite of his unfortunate personal history and ill fortune— whose one-time mistake, though inexcusable, is to some extent understandable.

The central antagonist, Stephen Doyle —an Irish American veteran of the Civil War and a member of the secret American Fenian group— arrives from New York to seek revenge by assassinating the mayor of Manchester. There is something "dark and narcissistic" (Theroux 2020) in his mentality of a hired killer for whom the end always justifies the means. He joined the army because it offered him a livelihood and regularity at the time when his life was becoming wayward, and he grew to like being a soldier. Owing to his psychopathic disposition he feels no fear in situations others would regard as frightening: danger and violence thrill him, "the reason he still fights, the truest, deepest reason — [is] not for the cause or the glory, but for those moments out of time […] when the world beats its savage drum, and he —unthinking and heedless— steps to its measure" (McGuire 2020: 66), and what he feels when the fight is over is "not relief so much as grief and sadness" (172). For him, human life is of little value as it can be easily terminated, and far from unique as there is always "someone else coming after" (188). Doyle's inability to feel empathy, his utmost pragmatism and absence of belief in anything that transcends one's physical existence make him a particularly dangerous adversary.

Doyle is vengeful and neither forgets nor forgives anything he considers to be an injustice to himself, as can be seen when, after more than ten years, he visits the farm of Fergus McBride, his uncle who took care of him as a thirteen-year-old orphan. Two years into his time on the farm, McBride catches him masturbating over Anna, his housekeeper, while she sleeps, and gives him a severe beating, after which the humiliated Doyle runs away from the farm. Although Doyle deludes himself that as a mature man "he is no longer angry or ashamed" (McGuire 2020: 301), the opposite proves to be the case, especially when he learns that Anna and McBride are married with a son, and finds out that the sight of Anna's body still stirs in him "the turbid confluence of half a dozen nameless urges" (333). And so, when McBride reveals to him that he knows about the arrest warrant the British government has issued on him, Doyle mercilessly kills him with an axe. The rhetorical questions running in his mind right before this homicide —"How long have I waited? […] How often have I lived this moment out in dreams or masquerades and now it is arrived at last?" (340)— demonstrate how deeply possessed he has been by the thought of taking revenge on his uncle for what he saw as an unforgivable wrong.

No matter how wicked his deeds are, the character of Stephen Doyle is not a monster but rather embodies the "Born and Made Evil" archetype whose criminal tendencies are both personally conditioned and innate. Most of his acts are examples of instrumental evil — he plans his actions, and they always serve some purpose, though mostly dubious or unlawful. This purpose, however, is the sole objective and driving force of his endeavour, one that must be accomplished at any cost, and he chooses his actions according to their effectiveness with regard to this aim. In the long run, such a strategy is unacceptable for the more patriotic members of the Brotherhood, such as his fellow New York Fenians who, out of honour and decency, argue that earning their victory by mere slaughter would taint and betray the struggle, which Doyle dismisses as sentimental and cowardly. Regardless of his proclaimed dedication to the Irish cause, his violent utilitarianism and worldview devoid of ethics will always make him a mercenary who is unable to understand the broader context of events he is a part of. In this sense, Doyle can be taken as the epitome of a radical, fanatical freedom fighter whose political and religious proclamations are mere pretext, which is to disguise his true, personal violent urges, and whose distinctive psychological drives need to be well taken into consideration by those engaged in systematic prevention of such individuals' acts.

Yet the novel problematises Doyle's position within the story by placing his agenda against the oppressive intra-European colonial system, represented by the haughty and self-opinionated English police officials. McGuire also makes his villain appear more human by briefly outlining Doyle's personal history. The reader learns how from age thirteen Doyle had to leave Ireland for America to live with his uncle, who had agreed to take in his orphaned nephew, and how the awkward nighttime incident, followed by the thrashing, brought about his departure from the farm. This was followed by years of aimlessness as a wage labourer marked by poverty, drinking, brawling and solicitation of prostitution before he met the recruiting sergeant from the Union Army, up to how he found out warfare gives meaning to his existence. His experience from youth taught him that "you must murder the softness in yourself […] because if you don't then you will pay the price later on" (McGuire 2020: 241-242). Although none of this justifies his later atrocities, the reader is at least invited to take his family tragedy and turbulent adolescence into consideration, all the more because the narration recurrently juxtaposes his fate with O'Connor's. These parallels between the detective and the criminal disrupt the conventional detective fiction's dichotomy between right and wrong and thus allow the reader to better perceive and engage with the ethical considerations of their acts.

Although O'Connor and Doyle stand on opposite sides of the law and their roles within the plot are antagonistic, there are in fact quite a few similarities between the two Irishmen. In the first place, they are both outsiders sent to Manchester as experts who are supposed to enhance the local units' functioning, and they are received with distrust and irritation. Moreover, as steadfast professionals in their respective fields, they come into conflict with their new associates: O'Connor's system of Irish informers and reliance on his familiarity with Irish mentality are met with incredulity from his colleagues, who regard their 'English' methods as more effective; Doyle is met with opposition when he wants to check out members of the Manchester Brotherhood's leading circles, claiming from experience that traitors do happen here and there, only to be reminded that "[i]n America they might, but not around here" (McGuire 2020: 22). Several times their opinions, based on their judgement or intuition, match, such as with the hangings — O'Connor sees them as unfortunate from the side of the British since they will only provoke anger and radicalise moderate members of the Brotherhood, which is what Doyle welcomes as a service the British did to the Brotherhood, or when they both disagree when O'Connor's nephew, Michael Sullivan, is described as smart and suitable for secret operations.

Most importantly, the two men have remarkably similar family histories: like Doyle, O'Connor was in fact orphaned at age thirteen with his mother dead and his father imprisoned for manslaughter, left in care of his destitute aunt in Dublin. In spite of poverty, he came to like the city where, like Doyle, he tried a series of occupations without much success until he joined the Dublin police, where he discovered the job he liked. Yet, at this point, their life trajectories began to diverge: while O'Connor chose to devote himself to preventing violence and protecting decent people's peaceful lives, Doyle grew into a cynical and hard-hearted combatant and a hired slaughterer who, in the name of a higher cause, finds gratification in exterminating enemies. McGuire further makes the difference between their personalities perceptible by transcribing some of their thoughts in italics, particularly those running through their minds in the painful and decisive moments of their lives, which allows the reader access to a more complex psychology of the central adversaries. O'Connor's much more numerous italicised lines reveal how deeply frustrated he is at the way the Manchester detective department treat him professionally as well as personally, and how intensely he is haunted by his past mishaps and misfortunes. Doyle's highlighted thoughts, by contrast, only underscore his pathological heartlessness and vengefulness without any hint of remorse. And so, while the main sequence of O'Connor's italicised thoughts shows the reader through the conundrum of his moral queries and pangs of conscience that precede his return to drink and disobedience of the order, Doyle's attest to the consuming satisfaction he feels when given a chance to dispose of someone who stands in his way.

Upon Doyle's arrival in Manchester, he and O'Connor soon form a peculiar unit moving "separated but together" (McGuire 2020: 27) along the bustling streets, one day the detective searching for the suspect, the other day the assassin shadowing the inspector. In this thrilling game, when they are one-upping each other with clever ruses and thwarting the opponent's moves, they develop a certain kind of mutual respect, based, in part subconsciously, on their resemblances. For Doyle, this feeling of respect is uncanny, as it overwhelms him precisely in the moment when he can easily kill O'Connor. Afterwards, he does not understand what stopped him, "[s]omething in the man's eyes, […] or in his face perhaps, some shade or sadness that gave him pause. Hard to believe. Strange to think of it" (242), but he assesses it as his misjudgement and swears to himself not to succumb to it if another such opportunity presents itself. This occurs in Pennsylvania, where Doyle murders O'Connor in an insidious way, proving that he has learnt his deviant lesson from that momentary weakness. Having carefully analysed the available findings, O'Connor tries to disprove his colleagues' conviction that Doyle is a mindless fiend with skewed vision by claiming that he is rather a human, "not so very different from you and me" (216), which is why his behaviour evinces a detectable logic whose disclosure might forestall his offence. With his systematic approach drawing on the informers' hints in order to compose the culprit's psychological profile and detect his motivation and potential causality behind his acts, the character of O'Connor anticipates methods and procedures used by modern investigative and intelligence services in dealing with organised crime and terrorism, which are often preferable to one-off repressive measures despite their non-public and long-term character, making them unsuitable as attractive political gestures.

5. Ethics and/or Justice in The Abstainer

Despite his propensity for drink when struck by misfortune, O'Connor is a conscientious and self-reflective person who always weighs his decisions and acts against his professional ethics and conscience. However, his superiors superciliously show him that he is not granted the privilege of atoning for his past, making use of his disgrace as a Dublin policeman to belittle his achievements and cast doubt upon his character, as starkly summarised by Inspector Thompson: "Once a man has lost his way like you did, he can't go back again. It's impossible. Once the weakness has revealed itself, there's only one direction he can go" (McGuire 2020: 270-271). In reality, O'Connor feels personal responsibility for everything that goes wrong in his cases, even when he is not directly responsible for it. As the deaths pile up, he begins to be swallowed by futility, all the more that his English colleagues readily throw the blame on him, which only intensifies his despair and confusion. At night, his dreams are haunted by the voices of the recent dead, resonating in the expanding void of his soul, as if "the torrent of memory [is …] sweeping aside all that is solid and real" (323).

As his frustration is growing, he is troubled by doubts about his moral integrity. He recalls how, when unsettled from his father's recent death, he, as a patrolman, was provoked by an aggressive drunkard into delivering an unnecessary blow with his truncheon, pondering what hidden urge must have driven him into such undue action. And when he finds himself helpless in protecting his naïve nephew from being sent into a dangerous operation as a spy, he starts worrying that the checkered past he hoped he could get away from in Manchester may in reality be a consequence of some evil disposition in his character: "he wonders now if the darkness and disorder are inside him, if what he was trying to escape from is who he really is. He tells himself this isn't true, it can't be, but even the possibility of it fills him with a dreadful gloom" (McGuire 2020: 200). This self-doubt is what gradually brings him to apathy and resignation when, instead of covering his nephew's back, he is engaging in drinking and having sex with a prostitute. When he sobers up, he falls into a deep moral crisis with tormenting pangs of conscience. And so, when he learns that Doyle has fled to the States and the police have been unable to find even a trace of him, he resolves to hunt him down and kill him on his own.

Under Inspector Thompson nothing much changes in the workings of the department: just like before, nobody really cares about the person who killed the informers and a policeman on duty. They are happy to have dispersed the controlling unit of the local Irish Brotherhood, with two of its members dead and others under arrest —something tangible to serve to the media— and have no intention of searching for the long-gone assassin. O'Connor's abrupt status changeover from a CID detective to a prisoner and suspected traitor points to the ever-insecure position of a vulnerability-prone outsider within the 'grander' schemes of power struggles and politicking. "Everything different, […] but everything the same. Time becomes memory, and memory becomes the ditch in which we drown" (McGuire 2020: 288), sighs O'Connor, as if he was the only one to remember what preceded this 'achievement', the only one to feel obligation to those who lost their lives in the process.

What defines O'Connor's ethical being is his responsive relationship to concrete other people. Although they are often not much to his liking —his English colleagues, the informers, his nephew— he always tries to approach them in a humane manner, talking to them respectfully, feeling moral responsibility for them if his work interferes in their fates. His life and contentment have always been determined by other people, like his wife and his similarly minded fellow Dublin policemen, and so his Manchester exile is marked by this need to gravitate towards the other. He is not very successful in this regard, though not always through his own fault: while in Fazackerley he fails to recognise a faithful comrade, falling prey to the prejudice that all his English colleagues are the same, with Rose Flanagan he does all he can, but is thwarted by adverse circumstances. With a series of failures behind him, afraid of further commitments, he temporarily reneges on his principles. He eventually finds the strength to resist the illusorily liberating promise of unconcerned solipsism, but only when far away from England. The final part of the novel, though initially revolving around O'Connor's self-imposed mission to find and destroy the runaway assassin, then turns out to reinstate the narrative's underlying ethical dimension.

In Pennsylvania, still filled with remorse for his past transgressions, O'Connor's moral obligation towards the other once again makes him sacrifice himself for the other, this time by saving a teenage orphan from slavery and becoming his guardian, giving the unfortunate young stranger priority over his own needs and intentions. In accordance with Levinas's ethics, the proximity of the other facing death summons O'Connor and requires him to take responsibility by making him realise that his indifference would make him an accomplice of that death. Thus, bad conscience raised by an encounter with the vulnerable other tears him from the solid ground on which he perseveres in his position (Levinas 1999: 24-25, 28) and prompts him to take action: "He asks himself sometimes why he has chosen to add to his troubles in this way, but he already knows the answer: Michael Sullivan is dead, but this boy is still living. He failed once before, and now has been given another chance" (McGuire 2020: 341-342). Gradually, the responsibility he feels for the neglected and illiterate boy gives his existence a new meaning and vivifies it with a grain of hopefulness.

With his new role and in the boy's company, O'Connor rediscovers the principles that once used to be paramount in his life and reassumes his former Levinasian humanity as "the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to bad conscience, to the possibility of its fearing injustice more than death, of preferring injustice suffered to injustice committed, and what justifies being to what ensures it" (Levinas 1999: 29). Consequently, he abstains from violence, coming to understand that looking after the innocent boy is of a higher value than killing a murderer. When he decides to report Doyle's presence to the police rather than completing his originally intended vengeance, he feels, despite his initial worry that "he has betrayed his own cause again" (McGuire 2020: 351), relieved and happy like "in he-doesn't-know-how-many-years" (352), indicating that the "darkness and disorder" which occupied his mind for so long has eventually been overcome and that he is eventually ready to turn away from the past towards the future. His resolution thus "suggests that memory is productive when it prompts us to care for the living" (Lehnen 2024: 12). His feeling of joy and ease is the best answer to his doubts, making him an indisputable moral winner despite the tragic ending awaiting him in the hours to come.

6. Conclusion: The Abstainer's Neo-Victorian Underpinnings

The Abstainer follows the trend McGuire established in *The North Water*: it is a story set in the Victorian era dealing with a series of violent crimes, revolving around a conflict between two individuals — a flawed yet innately moral protagonist and a wicked antagonist, and culminating in a suspenseful chase that takes place far away from the English Isles. However, while *The North Water* is essentially an adventure story that incorporates aspects of crime narration,[5] *The Abstainer* is crime fiction that focuses on the work of a police detective department uncovering a clandestine criminal operation of a radical Irish separatist organisation. Its protagonist is an experienced detective and its central villain an intelligent yet deviant criminal.

In spite of its pivotal subject matter, *The Abstainer* defies classification as either a conventional detective story or metaphysical detective fiction. It has a clear detective plotline, revealed crimes and a conclusive closure. At the same time, the novel presents a fallible detective who is likeable but with an inclination to drink under stress; pays substantial attention to his family history and personal life; probes his insecurities, doubts and moral queries; and makes him fail at the least convenient time. Opposed to him stands a violent villain, yet with a dismal personal history, professionalism and strategic thinking similar to those of the detective, a person who at one point even seems noble-minded enough not to kill his pursuer when he cannot defend himself properly. In effect, the narration questions an unequivocal borderline between good and evil, making its characters difficult to fully identify with. Moreover, by having the villain engaged in the case of the Irish independence struggle and portraying the English policemen as arrogant and xenophobic, it further undermines the binary categories of the offender and the victim, fairness and injustice, success and failure. However, it is through the story's ethical dilemmas complemented by insights into the two adversaries' psyches that O'Connor and Doyle, "motivated by different senses of justice" (Greenwald 2020), are clearly distinguished in terms of their true character and humaneness.

This aspect is underscored by the bleak closing part of the story. *The North Water*'s ending is far from optimistic, but the wrongdoings and evil characters are punished. *The Abstainer* offers no such consolation, as its prime ethical subject is brutally killed by a person who has intentionally numbed all his moral impulses for the sake of his twisted notion of the survival of the fittest. From the perspective of detective fiction, the novel's closure is far from satisfactory — the case is solved only partially, the main culprit evades arrest by fleeing the country and even murders the only person truly determined to bring him to justice. However, the protagonist's tough struggle with the shadows of the past and the unsettling present is eventually crowned by his strength to (re)assume a distinct moral stance stemming from the Levinasian ethical principle of generosity to and priority of the other regardless of one's own difficulties and discomforts. The novel's framework of meaning thus lies outside its detective plotline, within the domain of ethics, by which it transcends its manifest generic and historical setting.

McGuire's employment of the above-mentioned devices and strategies sets *The Abstainer* free from the restraints of genre fiction, be it detective or historical. The novel tells a detective story set in Victorian England but filtered through the present-day sensibility. Its blurred dichotomy between right and wrong and potent ethical dimension, together with implied questions embracing the inherent intricacies of ever-current concerns regarding systematic violence and criminality such as the devastating socio-cultural and psychological impacts of political oppression, the perilous consequences of radical freedom fighting, the legitimacy and effectiveness of demonstrative repressive measures for suppression of international terrorism and organised crime, and the ambiguous position of a liminal individual within the often-opposing currents of larger geopolitical affairs, thus make it a noteworthy specimen of contemporary neo-Victorian crime fiction.

Notes

1. The novel was listed by *The New York Times* as one of the 10 Best Books of 2016, and it also won the Royal Society of Literature Encore Award and Historical Writers' Association Gold Crown Award in 2017.

2. In his review of *The Abstainer*, Roddy Doyle (2020) even labels McGuire as "Dickens in the present tense, Dickens for the 21st century".

3. In *The North Water* it is Hull, the seaport town where McGuire grew up.

4. Apart from London and Dublin, targets of this campaign included Manchester, Chester, Liverpool and Glasgow.

5. For a more in-depth exploration of elements of crime narrative in this novel, see Petr Chalupský's article "Neo-Victorian Felony — Crime Narratives in Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* and Ian McGuire's *The North Water*" (2021).

Works Cited

Andress, David. 1998. "Truth, Ethics and Imagination: Thoughts on the Purpose of History". In Arnold, John, Kate Davies and Simon Ditchfield (eds.) *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture.* Donhead: 237-248.

Arenas, Enrique Cámara. 2011. "Villains in Our Mind: A Psychological Approach to Literary and Filmic Villainy". Fahraeus, Anna and Dikmen Yakah Çamoğlu (eds.) *Villains and Villainy: Embodiments of Evil in Literature, Popular Culture and Media*. Rodopi: 3-27.

Arias, Rosario and Patricia Pulham. 2009. "Introduction". In Arias, Rosario and Patricia Pulham (eds.) *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Palgrave Macmillan: xi-xxvi.

Arnautou, Charlotte. 2019. "The Metaphysical Detective Fiction of G.K. Chesterton: 'This is Not a Story of Crime'". *Études Anglaises* 72 (3): 291-308.

Chalupský, Petr. 2021. "Neo-Victorian Felony — Crime Narratives in Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* and Ian McGuire's *The North Water*". *Ars Aeterna* 13 (2): 16-30.

Cox, Jessica. 2019. *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Dilman, Ilham. 2005. *The Self, the Soul and the Psychology of Good and Evil*. Routledge.

Doyle, Roddy. 2020. "The Rebel, the Policeman and a Chase Through Britain and Beyond". *The New York Times* (September 15). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/books/review/ian-mcguire-abstainer.html>. Accessed September 1, 2024.

Gibson, Andrew. 2001. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*. Routledge.

Greenwald, Elissa. 2020. "*The Abstainer*: A Novel". *New York Journal of Books*. <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/abstainer-novel>. Accessed September 15, 2024.

Gregoriou, Christiana. 2007. *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gutleben, Christian and Julian Wolfreys. 2010. "Postmodernism Revisited: The Ethical Drive of Postmodern Trauma in Neo-Victorian Fiction". In Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben (eds.): 37-72.

Hadley, Louisa. 2010. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Holquist, Michael. 1983. "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction". In Most, Glenn W. and William Stowe (eds.) *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 149-174.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben. 2010a. "Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century". In Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben (eds.): 1-34.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben. (eds.) 2010b. *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Rodopi.

Kravitz, Bennett. 2013. "Thoughts on the Anti-Detective in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Adam Ross's *Mister Peanut*, and Martha Grimes' *The Old Wine Shades*". *Studies in Popular Culture* 36 (1): 45-61.

Krawczyk-Żywko, Lucyna. 2017. "Beyond Sherlock Holmes: An Introduction". In Krawczyk-Żywko, Lucyna (ed.) *Victorian Detectives in Contemporary Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan: 1-11.

Lehnen, Christine. 2024. "'Time Becomes Memory, and Memory Becomes the Ditch in which We Drown': Rethinking Modes of Knowing the Past in Ian McGuire's *The Abstainer* (2020)". *Textual Practice* 38: 1-18.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1999. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Trans. M.B. Smith. The Athlone Press.

McGinn, Colin. 2003. *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*. Oxford U.P.

McGuire, Ian. 2006. *Incredible Bodies*. Bloomsbury.

McGuire, Ian. 2016. *The North Water*. Scribner.

McGuire, Ian. 2020. *The Abstainer*. Scribner.

Merivale, Patricia and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. 1999. "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story". In Merivale, Patricia and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (eds.) *The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1-24.

Mitchell, Kate. 2010. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Poore, Benjamin. 2017. "The Villain-Effect: Distance and Ubiquity in Neo-Victorian Popular Culture". In Poore, Benjamin (ed.) *Neo-Victorian Villains: Adaptations and Transformations in Popular Culture*. Brill Rodopi: 1-48.

Porter, Lynnette. 2010. *Tarnished Heroes, Charming Villains, and Modern Monsters: Science Fiction in Shades of Gray on 21st Century Television*. McFarland.

Romero Ruiz, Maria Isabel. 2017. "Detective Fiction and Neo-Victorian Sexploitation: Violence, Morality and Rescue Work in Lee Jackson's *The Last Pleasure Garden* (2007) and *Ripper Street's* 'I Need Light'". *Neo-Victorian Studies* 9 (2): 41-69.

Shpayer-Makov, Haia. 2011. *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford U.P.

Theroux, Marcel. 2020. "*The Abstainer* by Ian McGuire review - 'The Wire by Gaslight'". *The Guardian* (October 8). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/08/the-abstainer-by-ian-mcguire-review-the-wire-by-gaslight>. Accessed September 10, 2024.

Tomaiuolo, Saverio. 2018. *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Received: 12/01/2025
Accepted: 29/10/2025

MELANCHOLY AND SUBLIME SPAIN: A STUDY OF GEORGE BORROW'S REPRESENTATION OF THE SPANISH LANDSCAPE IN *THE BIBLE IN SPAIN* (1843)

ESPAÑA MELANCÓLICA Y SUBLIME: ESTUDIO DE LA REPRESENTACIÓN DEL PAISAJE ESPAÑOL EN *THE BIBLE IN SPAIN* (1843) DE GEORGE BORROW

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611539

EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ PALENCIA
Universidad de Valladolid
eduardo.sanchez.palencia@uva.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8525-1695

Abstract

This article explores the representation of different Spanish natural and urban landscapes in George Borrow's travel book *The Bible in Spain* (1843). The study focuses on the author's allusions to the aesthetic category of the sublime and to melancholy, an emotion associated with the experience of sublimity in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The principal objective is to examine the way in which Borrow appreciates the diversity of different regions of Spain through his interpretation of the Spanish landscape as melancholic and sublime. The traveller's descriptions of the solitude and melancholy of Salamanca and the plains of Castile contrast dramatically with his vision of Seville as a paradise where melancholy cannot be felt. Moreover, Borrow portrays the Castilian plains and the valleys of El Bierzo as sublime, but he claims that the Leonese landscape resembles the English countryside and lacks the cheerlessness that characterises Castile. Lastly, the traveller emphasises the harshness of the sublimity of Cape Finisterre and associates this quality with the essence of Spaniards. Therefore, this article demonstrates that Borrow does not picture Spain as a homogeneous country because he distinguishes between different landscapes and regions through the concepts of melancholy and the sublime.

Keywords: British travel literature, George Borrow, Spanish landscape, melancholy, the sublime.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación de diferentes paisajes naturales y urbanos de España en el libro de viajes *The Bible in Spain* (1843) de George Borrow. El estudio se centra en las alusiones del autor a la categoría estética de lo sublime y a la melancolía, una emoción que se asocia a la experiencia de la sublimidad en la filosofía de Immanuel Kant. El objetivo principal es examinar la forma en la que Borrow aprecia la diversidad de diferentes regiones de España a través de su interpretación del paisaje español como melancólico y sublime. Las descripciones que proporciona el viajero de la soledad y la melancolía de Salamanca y las llanuras de Castilla contrastan radicalmente con su visión de Sevilla como un paraíso donde es imposible sentir melancolía. Además, Borrow describe las planicies castellanas y los valles del Bierzo como sublimes, pero afirma que el paisaje leonés se parece a los campos ingleses y carece de la melancolía que caracteriza a Castilla. Por último, el viajero destaca la dureza de la sublimidad del Cabo Finisterre y asocia esta cualidad a la esencia de los españoles. De este modo, este artículo demuestra que Borrow no representa España como un país homogéneo porque distingue entre diferentes paisajes y regiones a través de los conceptos de la melancolía y lo sublime.

Palabras clave: literatura de viajes británica, George Borrow, paisaje español, melancolía, lo sublime.

1. Introduction

The eighteenth century witnessed a transformation in the artistic and philosophical interpretation of nature. The emphasis on progress and rationalism that characterised the Age of Enlightenment had moulded the way in which nature was appreciated by intellectuals. Natural landscapes were valued in accordance with the economic benefit that could be obtained from them. Thus, fertile lands that could be exploited by men and areas of geological interest that could offer natural resources to enhance financial prosperity were held in the highest regard (Ortas Durand 1999: 56-57). Nevertheless, the Romantic sensibility that arose in the second half of the eighteenth century led to the emergence of a renewed interest in the aesthetic value of nature. Artists, philosophers and travellers began to analyse the emotions that the observation of certain natural elements made them feel, and the admiration of nature from a practical perspective was gradually substituted by a fascination with its aesthetic qualities. This paradigm change motivated the establishment of aesthetic categories that could encapsulate the new perception of nature. As a result, a series of aesthetic concepts that had been studied and developed in the eighteenth century were incorporated into the artistic and literary ideals of the Romantic movement. The Romantic conception of nature was exceptionally influenced by two categories that had been explored by philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant: the beautiful, which evokes pleasure and joy; and the sublime, which causes terror and pain. The picturesque, which was mainly analysed by William Gilpin (1792), was another aesthetic quality that was highly valued by the Romantics. It refers to natural landscapes whose variety and singularity make them perfect to be captured by an artist in a painting.

The picturesque had a huge significance in the nineteenth century, especially among travellers who visited other countries in search of that precious aesthetic ideal. Travellers did not only seek the picturesque in nature, but also in the native people of foreign nations whose traditions and costumes had a distinctive identity. That is the principal reason why Spain became one of the most widely visited countries in the nineteenth century. A large number of travellers embarked on a journey to Spain to discover a land that, as believed by other European nations, was anchored in the past, oriental and, in essence, exotic and picturesque (Ortega Cantero 1990; Vega 2004; González Moreno and González Moreno 2010; Andreu Miralles 2016). Such was the case of George Borrow, an English writer entrusted by the Bible Society with the task of circulating the Bible in the vernacular in Spain. This mission gave him the opportunity to explore the country in depth over the course of five years. His experience on the peninsula inspired him to write *The Bible in Spain* (1843), a travel book in which he narrates his adventures and provides descriptions of the customs and the inhabitants of the different regions that he visited. Furthermore, the book portrays countless Spanish landscapes in great detail. Borrow alludes to the aforementioned aesthetic categories to illustrate the attributes of the scenery and his own impressions. Numerous locations are considered "picturesque" by the traveller, but to describe other places he employs the terms "sublime" and "sublimity". Therefore, Borrow continues the tradition of depicting Spain as a picturesque land, but he also portrays the country according to the Burkean and Kantian sublime that Romantic artists and poets sought in regions such as the Alps. Moreover, the sublime landscapes that the traveller contemplates in certain parts of the Castiles and the Kingdom of León evoke an emotion in him: melancholy. The connection between sublimity and melancholy is analysed profoundly by Kant in his philosophical treatises. He clarifies that the special sensibility that melancholic people possess makes them prone to perceive the sublime (Kant 2011: 27). In addition, he interprets melancholy as an inherent emotion in the experience of sublimity, arising from the pain and powerlessness that the sublime causes. Thus, Borrow's representation of the Castilian and Leonese sublime serves as a literary testimony to the Kantian conception of melancholy and its association with sublimity. However, the traveller's depiction of the Spanish sublime is not always melancholic, as he portrays other regions whose grand natural landscapes differ enormously from "arid and cheerless" Spain (Borrow 1843: 138). For instance, he even states that Andalusia is a land where melancholy cannot be felt.

This article examines George Borrow's representation of certain Spanish landscapes and cities as melancholy and sublime in *The Bible in Spain*. The primary objective is to analyse how Borrow perceives the diversity of different regions of Spain through a Romantic prism based on the aesthetic concepts of sublimity and melancholy. Moreover, this study aims to explore the continuity of the Romantic ideals in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, as well as the influence that the philosophies of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant had on Borrow's understanding of the Spanish landscape. First, the way in which the sublime was conceived by Burke and Kant in the eighteenth century is examined, laying emphasis on the notion of melancholy as a sentiment closely connected with the experience of sublimity. Second, some fragments of Borrow's travel book are studied to demonstrate that he establishes a distinction between different Spanish regions. In the end, this article is expected to reveal that Borrow does not imagine Spain as a homogeneous country, but as a land composed of contrasting landscapes whose sublimity inspires feelings that oscillate between melancholy and joy.

2. Philosophical and Artistic Perspectives on the Sublime and Melancholy

The eighteenth-century conception of the sublime was highly influenced by the *Περὶ Ὕψους*, a treatise dating to about the first century AD in which the sublime is associated with the emotion of ecstasy that good writing and rhetorical style can generate in an audience (Ortas Durand 1999: 107-108). It is thus important to notice that, since its origin, the study of the sublime has laid emphasis on the internal perspective of the person who experiences it. Although the sublime was initially bound to the sphere of rhetoric, in the eighteenth century it was conceived as an aesthetic quality of nature. In his treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke defines the sources of the sublime as the origin of "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (1823: 45). Therefore, the philosopher's analysis of sublimity is focused on the internal commotion experienced by those who perceive the sublime in nature. "Astonishment" is the name given by Burke to the highest effect caused by the sublime, and it is described as a state in which a person's capacity to reason and act is lost, as happens when one experiences horror. Hence, Burke associates the sublime with pain and fear and claims that terror is its ruling principle. Whereas beautiful objects provoke pleasure and love in the observer, sublime objects produce apprehension. Furthermore, the philosopher illustrates the founts of the sublime, which include features present in nature such as vastness, infinity, vacuity, solitude and silence. Greatness of dimension being one of the most powerful causes of sublimity, mountainous landscapes were the fundamental source of inspiration of Romantic artists and travellers who were avid for the sublime.

In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant affirms that a natural object cannot be called sublime, since sublimity refers to the mental experience that the object arouses, and, therefore, it can solely be sought in our ideas. Moreover, the philosopher associates the sublime with magnitude and unboundedness. He claims that it is connected with quantity and not with quality because it is the vastness of a natural object that agitates the mind. Hence, the sublime is caused by nature's chaos and devastation, which is found in fearful objects such as an erupting volcano or a tempestuous ocean. For Kant, the sublime is experienced as a painful emotion due to the incapacity of the human mind to measure the magnitude of the natural object that provokes it. It is in this moment of fear, confusion and spiritual commotion when melancholy emerges. The sentiment of melancholy is derived from the fear that the soul suffers when its limitations are exposed in confronting a challenge that cannot be overcome (Rivas López and García Platas 2013: 79; Morán Roa 2022: 335-336). In his work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Kant distinguishes between three different types of sublimity:

> The feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet admiration and in yet others with a beauty spread over a sublime prospect. I will call the first the terrifying sublime, the second the noble, and the third the magnificent. (2011: 16)

Therefore, melancholy is a response to the pain and impotence caused by the terrifying sublime. Nevertheless, the Kantian conception of sublimity combines terror and pain with what the philosopher calls "negative pleasure", since natural objects that are sources of the sublime "raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist […] which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence" (Kant 1987: 120). Thus, the experience of sublimity allows people to relativise the magnitude of other natural objects and even of their human concerns, because when an object is considered to be a fount of the sublime, it is implied that its vastness is such that everything else is small, and this capacity to reason illustrates human independence from nature. As a result, a pleasurable feeling emerges from the pain and melancholy caused by the sublime (Brady and Haapala 2003; Rivas López and García Platas 2013: 79). The synthesis of pleasure and displeasure is a characteristic shared by the sublime and melancholy, and this double nature is what allows the latter to be deemed an aesthetic emotion (Brady and Haapala 2003).

The duality of melancholy as an aesthetic emotion that generates both pleasure and displeasure is based on its reflective character. Although melancholy can be accompanied by painful feelings of sorrow and nostalgia, it invites people to reflect on jovial memories of the past and to fantasise around them (Brady and Haapala 2003). This explains the connection between the sublime and melancholy, since "the two emotions share a higher reflective element; a feeling of elevating ourselves above the crudeness of stronger, more immediate feelings" (Brady and Haapala 2003). In addition, melancholy has often been associated with nature, since natural areas serve as places of meditation where a person can be in a solitary state that facilitates reflection. Thus, the sublime and melancholy have their origin in nature:

> With melancholy, nature provides the solitude that serves as backdrop to our mood; while with the sublime, it is most often natural objects that evoke this feeling. The same desolate moor, or indeed a vast, gloomy ocean, may give rise to either melancholy or sublime feeling. (Brady and Haapala 2003)

This notion can be associated with the philosophy of Edmund Burke, who, as previously mentioned, conceives the ideas of solitude and silence as founts of the sublime. Furthermore, Romantic art constitutes the tangible evidence of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century interpretation of melancholy as an aesthetic quality of nature. Romantic landscape painting is characterised by the sovereignty of nature, which is normally represented without the presence of any human figure and becomes the protagonist of the scene, producing feelings of fear and melancholy in the observer (Argullol 1987: 16-17). A well-known example of the Romantic taste for tragic landscapes that inspire melancholy is J.M.W. Turner's oil painting *The Pass of Saint Gotthard, Switzerland* (1803-1804), which portrays an Alpine scene dominated by the sublimity of a vertiginous mountain abyss. Romantic sensibility is thus founded on a combination of melancholy and pleasure, which is reflected in the destructive yet enthralling essence of nature (47).

The devastating power of nature can also be observed in the ruins of ancient edifices that have succumbed to the passage of time and are covered with vines and weeds. Ruins are the material manifestation of the inevitability of time and the supremacy of nature (23). Romantic poets and artists were fascinated by ruins because they were remnants of an idealised past that was remembered with nostalgia (Crawford 1983; Argullol 1987: 22-23). In his philosophical work *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), Arthur Schopenhauer considers ruins as a source of the sublime because, due to "their great age, that is, their temporal duration, we feel ourselves dwarfed to insignificance in their presence, and yet revel in the pleasure of contemplating them" (1909: 273). Ruins were admired as symbols of a very distant past that represented the Romantic ideals and offered an escape route from the industrial society of the time. Therefore, ruins engender reflection on the past, and regardless of whether the memories that they evoke are real or imagined, they awaken a feeling of nostalgia and melancholy: "Ruins express the passage of time, and more specifically the qualities of impermanence and transience, all closely associated with melancholy. Ruins induce a contemplative state of mind, suggestive of events and lives from past ages that have come to an end" (Brady and Haapala 2003). Consequently, the connection between ruins, the sublime and melancholy elucidates the reason why the Romantics were captivated by those vestiges of ancient times. Poems such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) or Robert Browning's "Love among the Ruins" (1855) are just a few examples of the great inspiration that ruins were to late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British authors.

Poets and painters were not the only ones who found inspiration in sublime and melancholic landscapes or in the ruins of castles and churches. Travellers were tremendously influenced by the aesthetic ideals of Burke, Kant and Gilpin, and thus organised trips to foreign countries in pursuit of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque. Since mountains were considered the epitome of sublimity, most travellers selected mountainous countries for their tours, and Switzerland became the most popular one for this kind of tourism (Ortas Durand 1999: 122-126). Another country that attracted outstanding attention in the nineteenth century was Spain, and a large number of travellers decided to visit this land, which had mostly been ignored by tourists in the past (Vega 2004: 94-95). The Peninsular War (1808-1814) inspired the Romantics, who idealised the bravery of the Spaniards during the uprising and exalted their heroism and nationalism (Saglia 2000; Vega 2004; Andreu Miralles 2016: 61-69). Additionally, the oriental past of Spain contributed to the creation of a Romantic myth that imagined Spain as an exotic nation that had not progressed with the times and that was not European (Andreu Miralles 2016). As a matter of fact, the majority of travellers who visited Spain prioritised Andalusia, which occupied the largest part of their travel itineraries, because they considered that this region and its inhabitants perfectly represented the Spanish picturesque and oriental character (90). As a consequence, numerous travellers contributed to the Romantic myth of Spain by portraying a homogeneous country that was, in essence, Andalusian and oriental (Andreu Miralles 2016). Moreover, Spain and Spaniards were highly valued for their ruralness and their originality, since the Romantics abominated the process of industrialisation that was transforming cities into uninhabitable places, as well as converting all of the European countries into copies of one another (Ortega

Cantero 1990). In this manner, the deeply entrenched traditions of Spain and its country landscapes and ancient towns became sources of the picturesque, and numerous travellers were enthusiastic about escaping the monotony of industrial Europe (Ortega Cantero 1990; Vega 2004). With respect to urban landscapes, travellers were passionate about ancient cities like Toledo or Granada, whose ruinous edifices and labyrinthine layouts of narrow streets provided them with a picturesque appearance that was quite dissimilar to the modern European model (Ortega Cantero 1990: 130-131). However, the picturesqueness of Spain did not prevent travellers from experiencing the sublime in some of its landscapes and towns. The following section explores George Borrow's representation of Spain as sublime and melancholy in his travel book *The Bible in Spain*.

3. George Borrow's Melancholy and Sublime Spain

In *The Bible in Spain*, George Borrow recounts his experiences during the five years that he spent on the Iberian Peninsula as an agent of the Bible Society to circulate an edited version of the New Testament in Spanish. To accomplish his mission, he travelled through Spain and reached regions that had mostly been unexplored by foreign travellers in the past. The fervent interest in Andalusia caused, among other reasons, by its Moorish heritage, resulted in the recurrent marginalisation of other Spanish regions such as Galicia or Extremadura, which were not included in the itineraries of many travellers who visited the country (Vega 2004: 117; Andreu Miralles 2016: 90). Nevertheless, Borrow had the opportunity to travel across a large part of Spain and learn about the peculiarities of the different regions of the country, which he depicts in his travel book. Moreover, *The Bible in Spain* includes detailed descriptions of the natural landscapes and towns that the author explored during his travels. Borrow makes aesthetic judgements of several locations that he portrays as sublime and melancholy, which serve to establish a connection between the traveller's perception of the Spanish landscape and the Burkean and Kantian ideas on sublimity.

On his way to Medina del Campo, in the province of Valladolid, Borrow contemplates the infinite plains of Old Castile, which inspire him to write the following lines:

> With all that pertains to Spain, vastness and sublimity are associated: grand are its mountains, and no less grand are its plains, which seem of boundless extent, but which are not tame unbroken flats, like the steppes of Russia. Rough and uneven ground is continually occurring; here a deep ravine and gully worn by the wintry torrent; yonder an eminence not unfrequently craggy and savage, at whose top appears the lone solitary village. There is little that is blithesome and cheerful, but

> much that is melancholy. A few solitary rustics are occasionally seen toiling in the fields — fields without limit or boundary. (1843: 122)

Here, the traveller represents the plains as a source of the sublime based on the concepts of vastness and infinitude, which, as explained above, constitute the pillars of Burke's and Kant's philosophical perspectives. In addition, the traveller compares the plains of Old Castile to those of Russia, and states that the former are more savage because of their irregular ground. When Burke defines vastness as one of the founts of sublimity, he claims that "the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished" (1823: 98). Thus, Borrow's description of the plains of Old Castile harmonises perfectly with Burke's conception of vastness and the sublime. Furthermore, Borrow claims that sublimity is an inherent trait of Spain, and, in their grandeur, the limitless plains of Old Castile are representative of the country. This idea can be related to Kant, who, in describing the different national characters in connection with the beautiful and the sublime, affirms that sublimity is a particular feature of Spaniards:

> In the national character that has in it the expression of the sublime, this is either of the terrifying kind, which inclines a bit to the adventurous, or it is a feeling for the noble, or for the magnificent. I think that I have grounds sufficient to attribute the first kind of feeling to the Spaniard. (2011: 50)

Hence, Kant associates Spain with the terrifying sublime, which, as stated previously, is the kind of sublimity that provokes a sentiment of melancholy. Consequently, both Kant and Borrow establish a connection between Spain and melancholy. In fact, Borrow refers to the plains of Old Castile as melancholy, and he relates their melancholic character to the solitude of the scene, which presents a "lone solitary village" and a "few solitary rustics". As a result, another Burkean source of the sublime can be found in the plains of Old Castile — that of solitude, which also evokes melancholy. Moreover, the traveller's description of the plains of Old Castile is similar to his perception of the plains of New Castile, which, although using fewer words, he portrays as "wide and melancholy" (1823: 64). Therefore, the contemplation of the magnitude and sublimity of the Castilian plains makes Borrow experience a melancholic feeling similar to the one described by Kant.

Yet Borrow's description of the Castilian plains as sublime is peculiar and unusual, since the Romantics were normally not attracted by this kind of landscape. Although Burke and Kant conceive infinitude as one of the principal sources of sublimity, the long extension of a plain is considered by Burke to be less grand than the height and depth that can be observed in a mountainous landscape. In addition, a cultivated field was generally perceived as the result of the degradation of a natural landscape that had been transformed by men for economic purposes (Ortega Cantero 1990: 126). As a matter of fact, other nineteenth-century British travellers provide negative descriptions of the Castilian plains that differ significantly from Borrow's. For instance, in *A Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home* (1845), Richard Ford writes the following lines on central Spain:

> The interior of this portion, and especially the provinces of the two Castiles and La Mancha, both in the physical condition of the soil and the moral qualities of the inhabitants, presents a very unfavourable view of the Peninsula: these inland steppes are burnt up by summer suns, tempest and wind-rent during winter. The common absence of trees exposes these wide unprotected plains to the rage and violence of the elements; poverty-stricken mud houses, scattered here and there in the desolate extent, afford a wretched home to a poor, proud and ignorant population. (1845: 92)

Thus, Ford's depiction of the plains is much more unfavourable and offers a significant contrast to Borrow's appreciation of the Castilian sublime. Nevertheless, it is interesting to mention that, in the same manner as Borrow, Ford also refers to the melancholy feeling that the plains of Castile evoke:

> Her hedgeless, treeless tracts of corn-field, bounded only by the low horizon; her uninhabited, uncultivated plains, abandoned to the wild flower and the bee, and which are rendered still more melancholy by ruined castle, or village, which stand out bleaching skeletons of a former vitality […] The wanderer, far from home and friends, feels doubly a stranger in this strange land, where no smile greets his coming, no tear is shed at his going. (47)

This description is quite similar to Borrow's, as Ford accentuates the solitude of the Castilian landscape and, although he does not allude to the sublime directly, he emphasises the infinitude of the plains. Moreover, he employs the term "melancholy" to refer to the plains, and he mentions the emotion in connection with the ruins that are sometimes found in Castile. Lady Louisa Tenison is another traveller who, in *Castile and Andalucia*, portrays the Castilian plains in a negative way:

> The plains of Castile present little to interest the traveller. Wide and solitary steppes, as lonely almost as the Desert —affording indeed signs of cultivation, but scarcely a trace of the hand which tills them— meet the eye in every direction, and render a journey through them one of dull and unvarying monotony. (1853: 474)

Tenison describes the solitude of the plains, but she does not associate it with the sublime. Instead, she represents the plains as monotonous and, thus, as the opposite of the picturesque ideal of variety and irregularity that was extremely valued by nineteenth-century travellers. The disparity between the plains of Castile and the ideals of the picturesque is emphasised by Thomas Roscoe in his travel book *The Tourist in Spain: Biscay and the Castiles*:

> There are but about six miles to travel from Segovia to St. Ildefonso. Nevertheless, the pilgrim of the picturesque would scarcely feel any regret if the distance were still considerably less, the whole foreground of the landscape which meets his eye consisting of mere barren plains, with a few hungry hamlets sparingly scattered over them. (1837: 138)

Therefore, it is evident that numerous travellers interpreted Castile as the antithesis of the ideal Romantic landscape (Ortega Cantero 1990: 130).

Nonetheless, Borrow is not the only nineteenth-century traveller who perceives the boundlessness and solitude of the Castilian plains as sources of the sublime. In *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), Washington Irving compares the infinitude of the plains of the Castiles and La Mancha to the sublime vastness of the ocean:

> There is something, too, in the sternly simple features of the Spanish landscape, that impresses on the soul a feeling of sublimity. The immense plains of the Castiles and of La Mancha, extending as far as the eye can reach, derive an interest from their very nakedness and immensity, and possess, in some degree, the solemn grandeur of the ocean. (1849: 3)

Irving admires the uniformity of the plains because it is the absence of vegetation that makes them seem endless and gives them their sublime grandeur. Moreover, Irving affirms that Spain "is a stern, melancholy country, with rugged mountains, and long sweeping plains, destitute of trees, and indescribably silent and lonesome" (2). Thus, Irving establishes a connection between the sublimity of the plains and the melancholy that characterises Spain. It can be observed that Borrow's depiction of the Castilian plains closely resembles Irving's, as both refer to Burke's concepts of vastness and solitude and interpret melancholy as an essential attribute of the Spanish landscape. Taking into consideration that *Tales of the Alhambra* was published in 1832, the similarities between Borrow's and Irving's descriptions of the plains suggest that Borrow may have drawn inspiration from Irving's work.

When Borrow is travelling to Galicia, he enters the region of El Bierzo, in the Kingdom of León, and provides the following description of the natural surroundings that he contemplates: "Perhaps the whole world might be searched in vain for a spot whose natural charms could rival those of this plain or valley of Bembibre […] it exhibits all the peaceful beauties of an English landscape blended with something wild and grand" (1843: 139). Borrow compares the Leonese landscape to an English one, but he employs the terms "wild" and "grand" to refer to the former. Hence, for the traveller, nature in El Bierzo possesses the quality of grandeur that Burke and Kant attributed to the sublime. It is interesting to remark that the sublimity of El Bierzo is also depicted by Richard Ford, who calls this land "the Switzerland of Leon" (1845: 595), thus comparing its natural landscapes to those of the Swiss Alps. Borrow is so amazed by everything that surrounds him that he claims, “I could scarcely believe that I was in Spain, in general so brown, so arid and cheerless, and I almost fancied myself in Greece, in that land of ancient glory” (1843: 138). Although he does not employ the term “melancholy”, he claims that the majority of landscapes in Spain are “cheerless”, probably referring to the “melancholy plains” that he travelled through in the Castiles. Therefore, Borrow implies that melancholy is an inherent characteristic of the country, as he cannot believe that El Bierzo, a verdant and joyful place, could belong to Spain. Thus, he establishes a distinction between the Castiles and El Bierzo. The landscapes in all of them present elements that are sources of the sublime, but the Castilian ones are characterised by the sentiment of melancholy that surrounds them, while the ones in El Bierzo provoke a positive and agreeable feeling in the traveller. Additionally, when Borrow reaches Cape Finisterre, in Galicia, he claims that “on all sides there was grandeur and sublimity” (179). The traveller is astonished at the ferocity of the Atlantic Ocean and the savageness of the rocks that form the Galician shore, which he describes as “a fearful place in seasons of wind and tempest” (179). In fact, the wild maritime landscape inspires him to write the following lines:

> There is an air of stern and savage grandeur in everything around, which strongly captivates the imagination. This savage coast is the first glimpse of Spain which the voyager from the north catches, or he who has ploughed his way across the wide Atlantic: and well does it seem to realize all his visions of this strange land. “Yes”, he exclaims, “this is indeed Spain —stern, flinty, Spain— land emblematic of those spirits to which she has given birth”. (117)

It can be appreciated that Borrow refers to the Galician sublime as “stern” and “savage”, which bears a resemblance to the Kantian conception of the terrifying sublime as a source of fear and melancholy. Moreover, the traveller portrays the Galician shore and its stern sublimity as being distinctive of Spain and the character of Spaniards. Consequently, Borrow presents the sublime as an essential attribute of Spain again, which, as when he describes the Castilian plains, could be related to Kant’s reflection on the Spanish character and its connection with the terrifying sublime.

In Salamanca, Borrow experiences melancholy when he contemplates the ruinous and deteriorating state of the city and he recalls its former splendour:

> A melancholy town is Salamanca; the days of its collegiate glory are long since past by, never more to return […]. Yet, with all its melancholy, what an interesting, nay, what a magnificent place is Salamanca! How glorious are its deserted convents, and with what sublime but sullen grandeur do its huge and crumbling walls, which crown the precipitous bank of the Tormes, look down upon the lovely river and its venerable bridge! (116)

Borrow marvels at the sight of the decaying walls and edifices of Salamanca, and he portrays the ruins as a source of both melancholy and sublimity. The sentiment of melancholy that the apparent desolation of the city provokes in the traveller is not strictly unpleasant, as it arises through the experience of the sublime. On the one hand, Borrow interprets the ruins from a melancholic perspective as symbols of the passage of time and the ephemerality of life. On the other hand, the traveller depicts the ruins as vestiges of the illustrious history of the city, and their great antiquity generates a sublime feeling. As a result, the solitude of Salamanca and the majesty of its ruins transform the city into a place full of sublimity that captivates the author. It is interesting to mention that Richard Ford is another traveller who alludes to the melancholy character of the city, since he refers to "ruined Salamanca" (1845: 574) as "cheerless" (569).

Borrow's melancholic description of Salamanca differs greatly from the way in which Seville is represented in the book. The traveller is enchanted by the numerous charms of the Andalusian city, which he portrays as a "terrestrial Paradise" (1843: 261). He is delighted with the pleasant climate of Andalusia, the orange gardens that impregnate the city with their fragrance, and the oriental monuments that revive the exotic past of Spain. In fact, the traveller adores Seville to such an extent that he admits that he has "often sighed that [his] fate did not permit [him] to reside in such an Eden for the remainder of [his] days" (276). The magnificence of Seville is praised by the majority of the travellers who visited Spain, such as Richard Ford, who refers to the city as "the marvel of Andalucia" (1845: 241), or Lady Louisa Tenison, who is impressed with the vitality of the city and describes the Sevillians' singing and dancing as "a picture of life which must certainly be considered as peculiar to Seville, lending from its strangeness a tinge of oriental romance to this fair city" (1853: 141). As a matter of fact, a horse ride in the neighbourhood of Seville inspires Borrow to affirm that "it is impossible to continue melancholy in regions like these, and the ancient Greeks and Romans were right in making them the site of their Elysian fields" (1843: 279). Therefore, the contrast between the descriptions of Seville and Salamanca is evident. Both cities astonish Borrow, but in a different manner. While Salamanca is in a decaying state that makes him experience the sublime and the sentiment of melancholy that it entails, Seville is a cheerful city that offers him countless pleasures. Furthermore, the way in which Andalusia and the Castiles are depicted by the traveller reflects a distinction between the regions. According to Borrow, the melancholic feeling that is predominant in the Castilian territory and that he conceives as a characteristic trait of Spain cannot be experienced in Andalusia. Thus, the traveller portrays a dichotomy between two different Spains — one that is harsh, obscure, secluded and melancholy, and another that is warm, vibrant and delightful.

4. Conclusion

The fragments of George Borrow's *The Bible in Spain* that have been studied in this article show that the traveller associates Spain with the aesthetic category of the sublime. He is awed at the endlessness of the Castilian plains, the brutality and harshness of the Galician coast and the grandeur of the Leonese mountains and valleys — extremely diverse landscapes that the traveller portrays as sublime. Moreover, Borrow is mesmerised by the ruins of Spain, since they are tangible reminiscences of the history of a country whose orientalism and Medieval chivalry were much admired by the Romantics. In particular, he praises the sublimity of the ruins of Salamanca, a city that he describes as melancholy because it represents the glorious past of Spain and its subsequent downfall. For Borrow, melancholy is an emotion that is frequently felt throughout Castile. The infinite plains where the presence of men is almost non-existent become the epitome of a melancholic region whose solitude bewitches the traveller.

Considering that *The Bible in Spain* was published in 1843, this analysis demonstrates the survival of the Romantic ideals and the continued influence of the philosophies of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in early Victorian Britain. Furthermore, and most importantly, this article reveals that Borrow does not conceive of Spain as a homogeneous country and, by describing the landscapes of the different regions, he contributes to, but at the same time challenges, the stereotypical Romantic image of Spain that tends to conflate Spain and Andalusia. Firstly, through the concept of melancholy, the traveller represents Andalusia as antithetical to central Spain. The melancholic sentiment that Borrow experiences in Salamanca and the plains of Castile has no place in Seville, which he portrays as a paradise on Earth. Secondly, the traveller sees opposing sublimity in the landscapes of Castile and El Bierzo. Whereas the Castilian plains are described as melancholy, arid and desolate, Borrow depicts the valleys of El Bierzo as cheerful landscapes with rich vegetation that are similar to the English countryside. Finally, the traveller portrays the sublimity of Cape Finisterre as fearful and rough, and claims that it perfectly represents the character of Spain and the Spaniards. Therefore, Borrow's image of Seville and Andalusia is completely idealised, which is in consonance with the Romantic myth of Spain, but he acknowledges the diversity of other Spanish regions and interprets the melancholy of Castile and the severity of Galicia as characteristic of Spain. Thus, Borrow pictures a Spain full of contrasts whose sublime landscapes and cities offer the traveller an experience that fluctuates between pleasure, astonishment and melancholy.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was funded by the European Social Fund Plus, the Operational Programme for Castilla y León, and the Junta de Castilla y León, through the Consejería de Educación.

Works Cited

Andreu Miralles, Xavier. 2016. *El descubrimiento de España: mito romántico e identidad nacional*. Taurus.

Argullol, Rafael. 1987. *La atracción del abismo. Un itinerario por el paisaje romántico*. Plaza & Janés.

Borrow, George. 1843. *The Bible in Spain*. John Murray.

Brady, Emily and Arto Haapala. 2003. "Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion". *Contemporary Aesthetics* 1. <https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol1/iss1/6>. Accessed March 31, 2026.

Burke, Edmund. 1823. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Thomas McLean.

Crawford, Donald. 1983. "Nature and Art: Some Dialectical Relationships". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1): 49-58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/429946>.

Ford, Richard. 1845. *A Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home*. John Murray.

Gilpin, William. 1792. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape*. R. Blamire.

González Moreno, Fernando and Beatriz González Moreno. 2010. "(Re) Discovering Spain: English Travellers and the Belated Picturesque Tour". In Almeida, Joselyn M. (ed.) *Romanticism and the Anglo-Hispanic Imaginary*. Rodopi: 341-360. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042030336_016>.

Irving, Washington. 1849. *Tales of the Alhambra*. Baudry's European Library.

Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. W.S. Pluhar. Hackett.

Kant, Immanuel. 2011. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. Eds. P. Frierson and P. Guyer. Cambridge U.P.

Morán Roa, Alberto. 2022. "Kant y la melancolía: topografía de un fenómeno liminal". *Revista de Estudios Kantianos* 7 (2): 325-341. <https://doi.org/10.7203/REK.7.2.25570>.

Ortas Durand, Esther. 1999. *Viajeros ante el paisaje aragonés (1759-1850)*. Institución Fernando el Católico, Diputación de Zaragoza.

Ortega Cantero, Nicolás. 1990. "El paisaje de España en los viajeros románticos". *Ería* 22: 121-137.

Rivas López, Víctor Gerardo and Israel García Platas. 2013. "La experiencia de lo sublime y la melancolía en Kant". In Patiño Espino, Ramón and José Antonio Pérez Diestre (eds.) *Universalidad y Variedad en la Estética y el Arte*. BUAP: 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.59892/AES0402>.

Roscoe, Thomas. 1837. *The Tourist in Spain: Biscay and the Castiles*. Robert Jennings and Co.

Saglia, Diego. 2000. *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figurations of Iberia*. Rodopi.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1909. *The World as Will and Idea, vol. 1*. Trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.

Tenison, Lady Louisa. 1853. *Castile and Andalucia*. Richard Bentley.

Vega, Jesusa. 2004. "Viajar a España en la primera mitad del siglo XIX: Una aventura lejos de la civilización". *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares 59 (2):* 93-125. <https://doi.org/10.3989/rdtp.2004.v59.i2.129>.

Received: 03/02/2025
Accepted: 08/01/2026

"MY IDEA OF YOU": ENDURING ELEGY IN KAREN MCCARTHY WOOLF'S *AN AVIARY OF SMALL BIRDS*

"MY IDEA OF YOU": LA ELEGÍA PERDURABLE EN *AN AVIARY OF SMALL BIRDS,* DE KAREN MCCARTHY WOOLF

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611916

PILAR SÁNCHEZ CALLE
Universidad de Jaén
psanchez@ujaen.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4566-5300

Abstract

This article explores Karen McCarthy Woolf's *An Aviary of Small Birds* as a sequence of maternal elegies of loss that mourn the stillbirth of her son, Otto. Through a close reading and a formal analysis of the collection, I examine how the poems articulate the often-silenced experience of motherhood without child, portraying grief as an enduring presence rather than a process with closure. The collection resists conventional narratives of healing, instead embodying the complexities of maternal bereavement. By engaging with poetic form, imagery and language, McCarthy Woolf's work redefines elegy, bearing witness to the persistence of loss and the impossibility of resolution.

Keywords: elegy, maternal bereavement, mourning, Karen McCarthy Woolf, loss.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las elegías de una madre a su hijo Otto, nacido muerto, en el volumen de poesía *An Aviary of Small Birds*. Mediante una lectura atenta y un análisis formal, examino cómo los poemas representan la maternidad sin hijo, una experiencia a menudo silenciada, que articula el dolor como presencia constante y no como un proceso que se puede cerrar. El libro cuestiona narrativas tradicionales de superación, y ahonda en las complejidades del duelo materno. Con sus recursos formales e imágenes, los poemas de McCarthy Woolf redefinen la elegía, mostrando el lacerante dolor de la pérdida de su hijo y la imposibilidad de cerrar el duelo.

Palabras clave: elegía, duelo materno, lamento, Karen McCarthy Woolf, pérdida.

1. Introduction

Karen McCarthy Woolf was born in London in 1966. Her father was of Jamaican origin, part of the Windrush generation. She is a writer, editor and critic. She has edited literary anthologies such as *Kin* (1997), *Bittersweet: Black Women's Contemporary Poetry* (2003), *Ten: The New Wave* (2014) and *Ten: Poets of the New Generation* (2017). She is an associate editor at the international literary journal *Wasafiri* and is on the editorial board of *Magma* magazine. In an interview with Yvonne Reddick, McCarthy Woolf explains that *An Aviary of Small Birds*, a book of elegies for her dead baby son Otto, made her think about public bereavement and private grief, and about losing things that seemed certain. Nature has always been important for the poet, and she was aware that nature is more precarious than ever, so in her second book, *Seasonal Disturbances* (2017), she tries to make something universal, like the deterioration of the environment, as intimate as she can (Reddick 2022: 181-182).

This article examines McCarthy Woolf's *An Aviary of Small Birds* as a sequence of maternal loss elegies. These poems articulate the unique and devastating suffering of a mother mourning her stillborn son, Otto. Following Anne Whitehead, the poetic sequence alludes to the "movement of oscillation, rather than chronology, as resonant with the non-linear temporality of grief" (2023: 373). McCarthy Woolf composes a symphony of poems arranged not by rational order, but by the rhythms traced by her grief. The speaker does not write about dead people whose lives she witnessed or shared: her mourning is shaped by the absence of concrete memories with the infant, intensifying common elegiac concerns such as the inadequacy of language to express loss, the limitations of poetry as consolation and the impossibility of replacing the deceased through writing (Ramazani 1994; Uppal 2008; Regan 2021).

Through close readings and formal analysis, this article argues that *An Aviary of Small Birds* constructs a poetic landscape of grief marked by suffering, emptiness and the absence of consolation. The title situates the collection within a metaphorical register of fragility. "Aviary" evokes both containment and preservation, whereas "small birds" suggest vulnerability, ephemerality and innocence, expressing the loss of the poet's stillborn son, Otto. The speaker resists separation from her child, finding neither relief in religion nor comfort in ritual. Instead, she expresses a desire to descend into water, into the earth, thus suggesting a pull towards dissolution. Imagery of whiteness and lightness pervades the collection, evoking her wish to transcend bodily suffering. While moments of relief emerge through nature, they remain fleeting, offering no pastoral solace. Ultimately, McCarthy Woolf's elegiac sequence captures the persistence of maternal grief, resisting closure or resolution.

2. Elegy in Contemporary Poetry in English: A Brief Overview

Mourning articulates both the absence of what has been lost and the desire for what remains unattainable. Over time, the purpose of mourning in elegiac poetry has evolved to meet the needs of modern elegists (Uppal 2008: 264). Writing an elegy involves a tension between the poet's desire to honour the deceased and their personal need to process loss. Thus, elegies acknowledge the absence of the subject while striving to recreate their presence on the page (Cooper Davis 2008: 42). Furthermore, mourning is not merely an emotional response to grief but an active process, a ritual that serves both individual and collective purposes (Sacks 1985: 19; Uppal 2008: 36).

In his study of modern elegy in English, Jahan Ramazani observes that grief is often stigmatised as unhealthy and morbid, encouraging mourners to grieve in private so as not to disturb others. However, in his view, mourning remains a psychological necessity. Since the mid-19th century, elegies have shifted from universal representations of the dead and mourners to more intimate and particularised expressions of loss (Ramazani 1994: 15-18). Ramazani refers to Freud and his distinction between mourning and melancholia. Although Freud asserted that 'normal' mourning progresses from shock to recovery, he also acknowledged that some mourners remain inconsolable, unable to fill the void left by loss. Moreover, elements of melancholia, such as ambivalence and self-reproach, are also present in mourning. In this line, and according to Ramazani, psychologist Melanie Klein posited that mourning includes regressive feelings of anger and aggression, oscillating between restoration and destructive impulses. Klein argued that mourning mirrors melancholia in its waves of emotional turmoil, fluctuating between mania and depression, omnipotence and annihilation. Ramazani concludes that modern elegies continue to navigate this interplay between melancholic and consolatory mourning (1994: 29-31).

A hallmark of contemporary elegy is its rejection of compensatory mourning. Poets often feel guilt over deriving artistic inspiration from loss and experience anxiety over transforming grief into poetic gain. Instead of following traditional elegiac conventions such as closure, rebirth and substitution, modern poets resist those norms (Ramazani 1994: 6-8; Spargo 2010: 413). While their work provides a space for mourning, it frequently adopts a tone of irony and self-reflection. For example, poets like Wallace Stevens, Wilfred Owen, T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Margaret Atwood eliminate physical and psychological masks, confronting grief in raw terms. We can define 'psychological masks' as the mental and emotional defences that obscure or soften grief. As a result, their elegies serve as private expressions that challenge societal tendencies to suppress mourning. Moreover, the language of modern elegy is marked by irony, self-mockery and opposition to sentimentality, scientific detachment and therapeutic optimism. It also resists enforced cheerfulness (Ramazani 1994: 15-17).

Stephen Regan asserts that the endurance and prestige of elegy stem from humanity's imaginative resilience in confronting mortality. The scepticism and anticonsolatory nature of contemporary elegies do not diminish the form's vitality but rather reflect evolving perceptions of death and the afterlife (Regan 2021: 126). In a similar vein, Priscila Uppal emphasises that the relationship between modern elegy and literary tradition is neither one of seamless continuity nor outright rupture. When traditional public mourning practices are marginalised or unavailable, elegy offers an alternative space for mourning (2008: 15). Rather than entirely rejecting traditional elegiac conventions —a ritualistic act of mourning and memorialising the loved one, a form of consolation that accepts the earthly separation of the dead loved one from the living realm— contemporary poets critically engage with them. Their elegies challenge the suppression of grief and strive to forge new means of articulating loss, defying modern taboos on death and mourning. For Uppal, mourning transforms us, ensuring that the lives of the lost remain ever-present, and thus, the process of grief remains unending (365).

2.1. Mourning the Death of a Child

Due to the declining rates of infant and child mortality and the decreasing number of children per household, the death of a child has come to be regarded as one of the most unnatural and tragic losses. In contemporary Western societies, where religious consolations have been largely set aside, accepting such a loss becomes particularly difficult (Uppal 2008: 26-27). Reflecting on elegies written in response to children's deaths, Ramazani observes that the loss of a child is harder to reconcile within the narrative of generational transmission than the death of a parent. As a result, mourning for children tends to be more intense than mourning for a parent or spouse (Ramazani 1994: 255).

Unlike elegies for adults, which often draw solace from shared memories, those mourning a child may struggle with an absence of lived experiences together. Children in these elegies are sometimes represented as distant and inaccessible, or as mere physical entities —a collection of veins, lungs and organs— underscoring the painful reality of parents who are excluded from their inner world. This representation often leads parents into a form of emotional exile, where they resist surrendering grief to consolation (257). Moreover, the death of a child disrupts the expected transmission of inheritance from parent to child, forcing parents to become the inheritors of their child's legacy. In this reversal, they find a way to fulfil the elegiac process of transmission (261).

Expanding on this idea, Tamarin Norwood explores the challenges of perinatal loss, encompassing miscarriage, induced abortion, stillbirth and neonatal death. She highlights that these losses lack culturally recognised rituals or traditions that might aid the bereaved in saying goodbye. Unlike other forms of grief, perinatal and neonatal mourning does not typically follow a predictable trajectory and is more likely to become prolonged or even pathological over time (Norwood 2021: 115-116).

In the absence of social scripts to help make sense of these disorienting deaths, material objects often take on symbolic significance. These physical objects serve as metaphors for the lost child, while parents create private rituals, memorials and archives for an infant they barely had the chance to know. However, these practices often remain secret, as sharing them can provoke feelings of embarrassment or shame. Norwood argues that poetry and creative narratives can play a vital role in breaking the social taboo surrounding neonatal death. Thus, they offer bereaved parents a means of expressing their grief, which is often unacknowledged by society (Norwood 2021: 122).

Similarly, in her essay on contemporary elegies of maternal loss, Anne Whitehead reinforces Norwood's reflections on the legitimacy of grieving parents' identities. She contends that bereaved parents are indeed "real parents" and deserve the social recognition that this role entails. Whitehead captures the painful reality of mothers whose hands remain empty, unfulfilled by the presence of a child. The absence of an acknowledged maternal role intensifies this grief, making it even harder for parents to find closure (2023: 380).

Additionally, Whitehead explores the ambivalence that grieving parents feel toward objects associated with parenthood, such as prams, baby slings, nappies and unused clothing. These items, once symbols of joyful expectation, become painful reminders of loss and markers of absence (380). She argues that creative literature on stillbirth and infant loss challenges the myth of the perfect pregnancy, bringing alternative experiences of parenthood into public discourse. By doing so, this literature confronts societal and institutional expectations that often demand silence, erasure or forced forgetting from bereaved parents (386).

3. The Bereaved Mother

The speaker in *An Aviary of Small Birds* is the mother of a stillborn baby, a bereaved mother who has lost not only a child but also an identity. The birthday of a dead child is a culturally unmarked territory (Whitehead 2023: 383). In the poems included in the collection, we observe an opposition between materiality and feeling. The poetic persona feels a mother, but her hands are empty with no baby to touch. Her lack of child contradicts this maternal feeling (Goss 2019: 142). No vocabulary seems to exist for a mother whose baby has died. In "My Limbs Beat Against the Glass", the speaker's stay in a hospital room ("I am trapped in a room where my baby dies", l. 1) gives way to a nightmare she suffers, in which the doctor transforms into "a Victorian lepidopterist with walrus whiskers" (l. 3), who "skewers my solar plexus/ and pins me to a felt-backed board", ll. 4-5). The present tense conveys both the inescapability of grief and the impossibility of closure: the poet is "trapped" not only in the physical room of death but also in a perpetual moment of trauma that resists temporal progression. Violence and pain are associated with the words "skewers", "pins", "beat" and "tighten". The use of the medical term "solar plexus", instead of chest or body, intensifies the feeling of distance between doctor and patient. The poem's persona identifies herself with a moth that does not fly, but just flaps its wings. She has become so light that she is empty inside, "as he tightens the frame to a vacuum" (l. 8). Like the moth, the speaker is imprisoned and becomes lighter and lighter, longing to be transformed into an insignificant being, as light and weightless as her baby was. The word "vacuum" alludes to her personal emptiness, to the gap left by her baby, which nothing can fill. There is a dissolution of the self that runs parallel to her baby's slipping away from life. The speaker becomes physically manipulated by this "Victorian lepidopterist", mirroring the way her baby's body will be handled and dissected by doctors. The hospital room transforms into a menacing space resembling a 19^{th}-century museum of natural sciences, where real life is relegated to still life. The images of the doctor/lepidopterist and the speaker/moth underscore the vulnerability and objectification of the grieving mother. In fact, they bring to mind the collection's title, *An Aviary of Small Birds*. Both the lepidopterist and the moth in the museum as well as the birds in an aviary evoke confinement, fragility and suspended life. The book becomes a poetic aviary, where poems preserve the memory of the beloved dead and give voice to the experience of loss, but the consolation they convey is as limited as the space in the aviary.

A similar death drive is articulated in the poem "Starlight". The stylistic simplicity of syntax, the use of the present and the repetition of the phrase "She wants" (ll. 1 and 5) reproduce the intense monotony of pain and the feeling of entrapment in an endless present time. The vision of the empty cot is unbearable, and the speaker wishes herself to be deprived of the memories of her child's death:

> She wants to be as far away
> from the gurney
>
> and the empty metal cot
> as starlight.
>
> She wants a spinal anaesthetic
> to flatten her like an iron
>
> so it's easy to forget
> the way they failed
>
> to electrocute life back. (ll. 1-9)

Her longing for non-being is wrought using the image of an iron whose weight metaphorically fills the internal void caused by the physical absence of her stillborn son ("the empty metal cot", l. 3). Additionally, the use of the third-person pronoun "she", instead of "I", suggests the speaker's self-effacement, as if adopting another identity could provide an escape from pain. This traumatic dissociation, reinforced by the poem's fragmented layout and blank spaces, conveys a sense of impersonality and emotional distance.

The following lines counterbalance the previous aseptic description of the speaker's wishes. The inclusion of the conjunction "But" brings the speaker back to the reality of her child's birth and death:

> But the birth
> is as close as the white spots
>
> under her eyelids (ll. 10-12)

The terrible glare of death has been likened by the speaker to "the white spots/ under her eyelids// when she stares into the sun/ hoping to be blinded" (ll. 11-14) (Whitehead 2023: 381). The speaker wishes to be annihilated by this burning whiteness.

The poem "White Butterflies" incorporates abundant sensory perceptions. Colours, sounds and scents from nature populate these lines, but they do not bring comfort, as nature did in traditional elegies:

> Three white butterflies
> flutter then land
> on the artichoked spikes
> in the walled garden (ll. 1-4)

The word "butterflies" (l. 1) forms an imperfect rhyme with "spikes" (l. 3), anticipating a future pain confirmed in the second stanza: "White sky against the ash. / The wind in the leaves / a rush of sighs." (ll. 5-7). "Ash" evokes the old Christian dictum "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return", underlining the brevity and fragility of human existence. The refreshing and natural "wind in the leaves" (l. 6) identifies with "a rush of sighs" (l. 6), a possible memory of the hospital days, a mixture of urgency and suffering. The key visual reference is the juxtaposition of "white sky" and "ash", which operates both literally (a scene in nature) and symbolically (life's fragility, memory of death), and then overlaps with sound ("wind", "sighs"), likening the natural world to embodied human suffering. Once again, McCarthy Woolf emphasises the contrast between the frailty of the butterfly and the harsh reality of the external world.

The last stanza mentions lavender, hydrangeas and lilies. These flowers grow by the pool or are part of a bouquet. All of them are white, and their whiteness is strongly associated with death, mourning and funeral rituals. In Western/Christian traditions, white symbolises purity, the soul's return to innocence and peace in the afterlife. The speaker here creates her own mourning rituals by exposing the tissues, the linen, the curtains, the muslin squares and the tiny vests she kept for the baby. Unlike the flowers, whose role is consolatory, these other objects expose her raw grief for the baby's absence:

> White hydrangeas
> wilted in the bouquet.
> White lilies sticky with scent.
> White tissues in the box.
> White linen on the bed.
> White curtains shrunk in the wash.
> White muslin squares.
> Your tiny white vests, unworn. (ll. 10-17)

The previous anaphoric phrases resound as a painful "Why?". Images of lightness and transparency end abruptly in the last line: "Your tiny white vests, unworn" (l. 17). The baby clothes that have not yet had the chance to become stained with use become detritus and markers of absence and death (Whitehead 2023: 380). In a very short period of time, the speaker has lost her identity as a mother. As mentioned above, no word defines a mother without a child — she is an orphan mother.

This sense of bereavement and orphanhood persists in the poem "Pinhole Camera", which opens with the image of the mother as an empty space:

> Light accumulates slowly
> inside her and the dead say

> keep your chin up, look to the sky,
> we can help you then.
> Gradually a landscape appears
> on photographic paper: (ll. 1-6)

These initial images evoke familiar holiday scenes which build a routine of ordinariness, but also concrete and natural elements: a "brown river" (l. 7), "white tourist boats" (l. 8), and "a Chesterfield sofa carved in sand/ where two black dogs/ snap at each other's tails" (ll. 9-11). However, these moments soon give way to more unsettling imagery, as in "A long/ exposure that drags on// for years" (ll. 11-13), followed by references to animals with long necks, like the giraffe, or with the "stiff fox" (l. 15) with "its brush fascinating and erect" (l. 16). For a brief moment, the speaker identifies with the giraffe's stance and the fox's rigid form, as if striving to rise above her grief. Yet, these proud creatures are soon replaced by a vision of "a boy with curly hair/ or an infant held close to the breast" (ll. 17-18). The recurring presence of animals, plants and natural landscapes underscores the centrality of nature in the poet's work. Yet her repeated attempts to seek refuge in it ultimately fail. The natural world offers no consolation; instead, it appears indifferent to her suffering or reflects it back to her, constantly returning images that confirm her identity as a mother without a child. The poem culminates in desolate images of the speaker's imagined motherhood, reinforcing her profound bereavement. As Uppal suggests, a chasm opens between the present and an unattainable future (2008: 17).

The previous poems construct a poetics of bereavement that repeatedly returns to images of emptiness, lightness and confinement. The recurring motifs of whiteness, the natural world and the body's dissolution reveal how the speaker negotiates the paradox of maternal identity after stillbirth: she is compelled to mourn in a cultural space that lacks a vocabulary for her loss. By weaving medical imagery with natural and domestic references, McCarthy Woolf destabilises the consolatory tradition of the elegy, instead exposing the raw persistence of grief and the impossibility of closure.

4. Against Consolation

The placement of "The Undertaker" as the opening poem is significant because, by confronting death directly through the figure of the undertaker, who is responsible for arranging the funeral, McCarthy Woolf shows her refusal to veil grief or delay its impact. The poem draws the reader immediately into a space where loss, absence and suffering are the central elements. In this way, the elegiac voice is established from the beginning. "The Undertaker" is filled with images of emptiness, lightness, whiteness and transparency, evoking the fragility of the baby's body and the brevity of his time in the world. The apparent insignificance of this tiny life starkly contrasts with the immense weight of grief expressed by the speaker. The poem's sombre title is part of the poetic sequence:

> The Undertaker
>
> wears white gloves
> and his left hand waves
> on the crowd, moves
>
> slowly as if under
> the surface where water
> swims sinuous as an elver
>
> that darts between clouds
> of ink in violet reeds
> weightless as birds (ll. 1-9)

The undertaker's movements are graceful and fluid, as if he were conducting an orchestra. His delicate white hand is juxtaposed against the image of an elver swimming "between clouds/ of ink in violet reeds/ weightless as birds" (ll. 7-9). This sense of peaceful movements gradually gives way to the weight of grief. The baby's body may have been light, but the memory of his death is unbearably heavy. The alliteration on the /w/ sound subtly echoes the unspoken questions "Why?" and "Where?", which linger in the background.

If "The Undertaker" illustrates how ritualised imagery of grace and lightness offers only ephemeral consolation in the face of a son's death, "Morbleu" confronts the reader with a raw eruption of grief. The almost ceremonial tone of the opening poem gives way to fractured syntax and dissonant sounds, as though the decorum of mourning has broken apart under the unbearable weight of loss. The words "mor bleu" are a form of "mort Dieu", God's death. To scream "blue murder" means to yell at the top of one's voice, especially out of terror. The poems *Morbleu* and *Mort-Dieu* are placed consecutively in the volume, one functioning as the speaker's cry and the other as the speaker's prayer to a God that is absent.

In "Morbleu", we observe patterns of alignment and disalignment, broken syntax, hard enjambments, lack of punctuation and capitalisation and mid-line tab stops. This fragmented discourse articulates the speaker's anguish at her son's silent heart.

The repetition of negative expressions "there's no more" (l. 1), "—we haven't got—" (l. 12), "—haven't got five minutes" (l. 14), "—rushes and there's no—" (l. 17), announces a medical emergency ("—we haven't got—/a heart beat", ll. 12-13) and are juxtaposed against the noises of everyday life:

> —rushes and there's no—
> no *ha ha ha* of music
> and radio
> the thud of workmen
> clatter of hollow poles — scaffolding
> a truck in first gears
> footsteps
> school (ll. 16-23)

> an O of bells clang—
> clangs across the river (ll. 24-25)

After this mosaic of sounds, the initial rush evolves towards "the hush" (l. 27), the final silence which precedes death:

> and then the hush
> of marble
> eyes unseen eyes unopened
> endlessly eyes (ll. 27-30).

The word "hush" (l. 27) conveys a sudden, deadly silence, its stillness becoming as haunting as the word "marble", which is emphasised by the enjambment. Marble, a cold and rigid stone often used in flooring, also refers to the small, glassy spheres children play with; both lifeless, inert and unmoving. This association deepens the sense of absence, mirroring the phrase "eyes unseen eyes unopened" (l. 29). The final line, "endlessly eyes", powerfully underscores the permanence of death. The disruption of grammar foregrounds the limits of perception: eyes, ordinarily associated with vision and recognition, are reconfigured as sites of absence, disconnection and silence. Thus, the agrammatical sequence "eyes unseen eyes unopened/ endlessly eyes" is not an isolated stylistic feature but part of the poem's overall strategy: language itself mimics the incompleteness of memory, the fragility of presence and the impossibility of fully articulating loss.

The poem "Mort-Dieu" could be interpreted as an anti-prayer:

> Our son
> dear God

is dead
and gone.
His tomb
was red
with blood
and warm
as tears.
He was
born still.
Was this
dear God
your will?

The poem consists of fourteen two-syllable lines. As the author herself explains, "The two syllables give the poem a binary, bell-like toll — to me it is the book's death knell. It is also the moment at which the test of faith is at its most acute, where not only a child, but God too has died" (McCarthy Woolf 2015). In the opening lines, the speaker emphasises the harsh reality of a son's death, with the rest of the poem unfolding from this central loss. The sound pattern is marked by imperfect rhymes, such as "son", "gone", "warm" and "tomb". The speaker employs a simple syntax, with the verb "be" appearing throughout, primarily in the past tense, except in line three, "Our son/ dear God/ is dead/ and gone". This choice reinforces the accumulation of anger, grief and disbelief, which culminates in the final rhetorical question: "Was this/ dear God/ your will?" (ll. 12-14).

The line "dear God" is repeated twice, once in the second line and again in the penultimate line, thus creating a frame around the poem. The word "dead" acts as a variation of "dear", so "dear God" subtly hints at "dead God". The simplicity of the syntax and imagery, along with the seemingly harmonious two-syllable lines, contrast sharply with the profound desolation the poem conveys: the devastation of losing an innocent life, a stillborn son and the realisation of God's absence. The speaker finds no solace in a God who seems indifferent to such suffering. The result of the speaker's spiritual confrontation with a non-existent God intensifies the tension between the poem's surface harmony and its inner despair, highlighting the void at the heart of the poem. Additionally, the poem's physical layout resembles the shape of a candle, which, according to Norwood, reinforces the potential of the maternal elegy to give both "weight and shape" to the experience of losing a baby (Norwood 2021: 122).

If "Mort-Dieu" exposes the collapse of faith and the absence of divine consolation, the following poems turn from the spiritual to the bureaucratic. The common thread is the overwhelming sense of meaninglessness: whether in prayer or in paperwork, neither God nor the state provide comfort or explanation. Poems like "The Paperwork" and "The Registrar's Office" reveal how traumatic administrative procedures become when grief dominates the self, making everything else seem absurd. "The Paperwork" presents the speaker grappling with an official form for an autopsy report. The tone shifts from incredulity to a grim determination, as she wonders, "Will it change anything if I decide/ your heart, liver, lungs, kidneys/ are returned to the abdominal cavity?" (ll. 2-4). In the second stanza, the speaker resolves that her baby's body must be preserved, declaring, "Under *Other requests or concerns:/ hands, feet, face, hair — all must be left intact*" (ll. 10-11, emphasis in original).

In the final stanza, the speaker allows doctors to examine her son's body but demands they restore it to its original form. Her earlier doubts transform these instructions into an oath to her child: "but they'll sew your little tummy up/ as if you were a rare medieval tapestry./ I'll make sure of that. *Eyes not to be touched*" (ll. 16-18, emphasis in original). The phrase "rare medieval tapestry" alludes to the baby's fragility and uniqueness, positioning him as more precious than the finest human creations. The mother insists that others handle his body with the utmost care and reverence, forbidding any intrusion upon his eyes. She would consider that action as a violation of his privacy and an affront to his body and his personhood. The use of the present tense heightens the poem's immediacy, allowing readers to experience, alongside the speaker, the overwhelming desolation of a mother forced to confront bureaucratic procedures just hours after her son's death.

"The Registrar's Office" recounts the speaker's visit to the registrar's office, presumably to obtain her son's death certificate. The poem unfolds in a stream-of-consciousness style, with words flowing as they come to the speaker's mind in a kind of free indirect speech. Enjambment accentuates the fragmentation and urgency of the poem's discourse. Darkness is closely associated with both the office and the black colour of meconium, reinforcing the sense of foreboding:

> The Registrar's Office
>
> isn't really an office it's a cupboard with
> no source of natural light, and I don't
> realise it but I'm loved up like the other
> mothers gazing at meconium as if it's fresh tar
> on a road not an odourless, black shit
> that's been on the boil for nine months (ll. 1-6)

These images contrast with the iced water that Lydia, the registrar, offers the speaker when they meet. The fresh water "[...] flows/ through me [...]" (10-11) physically but also psychologically because it releases her words:

> [...] and now we're holding each other while
> Simon's down in the mortuary and I tell
> her all about how he lost his mother from
> a brain tumor when I was six months
> gone, how her name was Lydia too, that
> it was so quick and now this. (ll. 11-16)

First her mother-in-law, then their baby son. The ephemeral yet unexpected consolation she finds in Lydia's embrace brings her to a moment of clarity: a person who handles death daily should work in an office with natural light. As she leaves, she vows

> [...] as I leave the room, when I get out of here, if
> it's the last thing I do, I will get you
> a window because that's not right, expecting
> someone to live and work and sign
> death certificates without a window (ll. 27-31)

The speaker's desire to provide Lydia with a window symbolises her wish to escape the suffocating darkness of death, offering a potential way out of suffering, a metaphorical escape into light and life. She draws attention to the inadequacy of traditional religious discourses, whose promises of a future reunion with the dead fail to console. It also emphasises human contact, in this case, the comfort of strangers, as the sole, though fragile, source of consolation.

5. Looking for the Absent Baby (Otto) in Liminal Spaces

In her study on elegy in Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*, Pauline Montassine argues that Atwood's speakers may refuse to directly refer to death as a defining element of separation, thus keeping the object of loss in a liminal space in which death can be redefined and even pushed back (2023: 112). In a similar vein, McCarthy Woolf's "Missing" captures this suspended grief: the speaker acknowledges that "your future is missing" (l. 2), yet continues to search for her child, negotiating absence without fully confronting the finality of death:

> In the photo your eyes are closed
> and you don't look like anything any more
> but you n*ever know* (ll. 7-9)

The words "*you never know*" (emphasis in original) keep her baby in the liminal space mentioned by Montassine (2023: 112). The poem's closing lines, "Is that you strapped to a stranger's chest,/ the one in the blue-for-boy sling?" (ll. 11-12), mark the speaker's final attempt to displace the experience of loss and sustain the hope of her child's presence.

In the poem "Otto", the speaker's attempts to confirm her baby's presence remain elusive:

> the best I can do is to sit
> on the purple bench
> under the Virginia creeper
> and listen to the bamboo
>
> wind chimes that sound
> nothing like but remind
> me of the sea: a keepsake
> from another life, gentle
> and full of careful planning (ll. 2-10)

Memories of a happier existence surface, yet in the following stanza, the sea, a classical elegiac topos (Kennedy 2007: 22), shifts into an inner swamp that engulfs her, where "Day and night/ the undergrowth simmers" (ll. 14-15). In the final lines, the speaker clings desperately to the illusion that her baby remains within reach, trapped in a liminal space between dream and reality. However, instead of Otto's cries, she faces an eerie silence that counters her "catastrophic rattle" (l. 24) and dominates the noise of passing traffic. In medical terms, the expression "death rattle" alludes to the sounds made by a dying person's throat and is considered one of the signs that death is near. Her internal turmoil echoes the death rattle while simultaneously evoking the muted sound of a baby's toy, an object her son will never use:

> I think your voice can't reach
> me, or worse you're saying
> nothing, as I continue
> my catastrophic rattle, your silence
> constant as the roar of traffic. (ll. 21-25)

"The Calf" portrays the speaker's attempts to communicate with her son. On a tourist boat in the Canary Islands, she observes a whale calf surrounded by its family:

> a blue and shiny calf
> dozing on the surface,
>
> guarded by 50-year-old aunts
> is a tone so high and long

it glows. All around
a communal whale brain

pulses. The little boat bobs
and then he's gone

down into the dark. (ll. 15-23)

The run-on lines create a rhythm of suspension and release, like waves rising and falling. They blur boundaries between calf, sound, light and the speaker's consciousness, drawing her into a liminal experience. Her frustration is palpable, as she had hoped to witness a young animal communicating with its mother in their shared language. It is as if she can almost picture her son reacting to her words, but that fleeting vision glows briefly before fading:

Something is better than nothing,
they tell you that.
This was not the sound

I'd waited for, but it was
as close as we'd ever got. (ll. 24-28)

In this enigmatic conclusion, the poet seems to accept Otto's death, but not a separation from him. The writing of a poem may establish a permanent connection with him that lingers despite the finality of death, "as close as we'd ever got" (l. 26). This language of frustration and restriction reveals again the failure of attempts at consolation.

In "An Aviary of Small Birds", the speaker recognises that in order to move forward in life, she must let go of the dead (Whitehead 2023: 385):

My love is an aviary
of small birds
and I must learn
to leave the door ajar... (ll. 1-4)

Following Montassine's reflections, we can interpret McCarthy Woolf's use of metaphors *in absentia* (italics in the original), where the object of comparison is not directly alluded to. Although death is central to the poem, the speaker's metaphors and figures of attenuation manage to keep it at a distance (Montassine 2023: 112). The speaker addresses her son as a "sparrow":

Are you the sparrow
who landed where I sat

at a slate table
sowing lettuces? (ll. 5-8)

The sparrow's lightness, its swift movements, echo the brevity of Otto's life:

swift and deft
you flit and peck peck
quick as the life that
constitutes your spirit (ll. 11-14).

In the final stanza, the speaker mentions the sound of her son's fetal heartbeat, "the tenor of your heart/ is true as a tuning fork struck/ — and high!" (ll. 25-27). By invoking the heartbeat, the speaker highlights this sound as the only one she has perceived from her son. The final lines, "My love/ is the bird that flies free" (ll. 27-28), portray the speaker's painful acceptance of the need to let go, no longer holding Otto captive in an aviary. The contrast between the steady beat of the baby's heart and the opening of the aviary door encompasses the speaker's internal conflict between holding on and letting go. Both images act as figures of attenuation, representing the speaker's constant and contradictory struggle to reconcile her desire to retain her child (evocation of the heartbeat) with the painful necessity of releasing him and moving forward (opening the door of her aviary/mind).

6. "As Rust in a Cut": The Indelibility of Grief

The final poems of *An Aviary of Small Birds* deepen McCarthy Woolf's meditation on the enduring bond between mother and child, illustrating how maternal grief resists resolution. The loss of a baby disrupts the stories and cultural scripts we use to make sense of a death because the stillborn has no voice and no personhood. McCarthy Woolf's speaker articulates the experience of maternal loss without ventriloquising the dead (Whitehead 2023: 374). She defies the consolation of traditional elegies by affirming her enduring bond with her dead son, revealing a persistent anger and grief that will never abandon her. According to Ramazani, when parents become the inheritors of their children's legacy, there is a strong resistance to surrender grief to consolation. The harsh fact of a son's death prompts an emotional exile that rules out any possibility of comfort (1994: 257).

In "Tasting Note for Grief #17", rage is personified as an intruder, infiltrating the speaker's body with insidious force:

Long and complex on the palate
rage attacks the tastebuds,
a territorial robin whose wings

coruscate the epiglottis, insidious
as rust in a cut. Her jaw
has started to clamp. Remembering
is a port wine stain. (ll. 1-7)

The speaker's body becomes the battleground, as suggested by the words "attacks" and "territorial". The tightening of her jaw symbolises the physical consequence of this emotional siege. The alliteration on the sound /r/ in "rage", "robin" and "rust" mimics the painful, repetitive penetration of a drill into flesh, evoking the inescapability of grief, "insidious/ as rust in a cut" (ll. 4-5). Memory, as she defines it, is a "port wine stain" (ll. 17), indelible, permanent and impossible to remove, like the grief that lingers long after loss.

In the following stanza, the speaker addresses the inadequacy of language in articulating sorrow: "Similes are useless/ on this red staircase" (ll. 8-9). As she ascends the "red staircase" of suffering, she draws on wine imagery to convey the depth and complexity of her grief. Unfortunately, in this field, she is a connoisseur. She knows about grief's varied flavours:

She has become a connoisseur
of its avoided flavours' Titian hues.
The nose has notes of cherry soda,
ginger biscuit, sang de boeuf.
This one is for laying down:
it will keep for years under the earth. (ll. 13-18)

In her attempt to articulate the nuances of her grief with the sophisticated lexicon of wine tasting, she acknowledges the futility of these metaphors. The elegant descriptions fail to mask the core of her suffering: a desire to lie with her child "under the earth". The "Titian hues" and "notes of cherry soda" are removed from the harsh reality of grief; only the "port wine stain" endures. The phrase "this one is for laying down" mirrors the practice of storing fine wine for years to mature, but here, it darkly suggests burial. Grief, like the body of her child, will remain underground, preserved indefinitely.

The red staircase, the port wine stain and the deep hues of memory all converge in a landscape where grief cannot be sweetened or diluted. The speaker's sorrow is not something to be tasted and understood; it is something that consumes, stains and endures.

I agree with Anne Whitehead when she states that "The Wish", the last poem in *An Aviary of Small Birds,* refers to an elusive entity that adopts many shapes (Whitehead 2023: 386). Many of these shapes are related to the natural world, its feature being its ability to colonise all empty spaces, such as trees and cells, "spreads its branches so twigs scratch/ third-floor windows, pushes through cracked/ glass" (ll. 1-3); "Every time the wish is amended, cells disperse/ subdivide, multiply" (ll. 4-5). The speaker's recurring images of natural spaces, animals and plants are stripped of the pastoral qualities that frequently offered consolation in traditional elegies. Here, nature provides no refuge from grief. On the contrary, the contemplation of wild creatures continually reminds her that, unlike them, she is not free but bound to her suffering.

The wish mutates into animals like horses, crows and *toros*, whose strength and unpredictability end up in violence: "Tomorrow the wish is a horse, [...]// his mane a scythe razing cornfields to the ground" (ll. 7-8). Here, the horse's movement is not just powerful but destructive, evoking both natural disaster and human devastation. The wish is equally menacing in the form of a crow, searching for vulnerabilities to exploit, or a bull driven by brute force: "today it's a crow looking for soft spots to stab./ Or a tricolor to wave at the *toros* who charge/ with muscled heads down" (ll. 10-12).

References to other animals (a tethered dog and a rhesus monkey) portray the wish as ceaseless in its aggression: "The wish is yappy as a tethered dog and industrial/ in its persistence: a rhesus monkey that bares its teeth" (ll. 15-16). The word "industrial" reinforces the mechanical, inexorable nature of grief, like an assembly line that never ceases production.

The wish is also intimate, embedded in everyday life: "The wish lives/ in a little silver box with WISH written on it" (ll. 12-13). It smiles from the curve of a chaise longue, "On anniversaries the wish smiles like a chaise longue" (l. 17), only to unleash a "death cry sonorous as a foghorn" (l. 18), suggesting both eerie stillness and inescapable mourning. It is at once monumental and minuscule, "big as America" yet "totally irrelevant" (l. 14), caught between grandeur and futility.

The speaker likens the wish to a cathedral, unfinished and expansive, a structure that is never whole, never at rest, "monumentally unfinished/ as Gaudi's dripping *cathedral*" (ll. 19-20). However, in the following line, the wish shifts again. It is no longer an ethereal architectural presence, but a parasite clinging to its host: "The wish is monumentally unfinished/ as Gaudi's dripping *cathedral/* and needs you, always, to be absolutely specific" (ll. 19-21). This transformation signals the inescapability of grief, which is no longer abstract but deeply personal, demanding constant attention and acknowledgement.

The poem closes as it began: "The wish. Always the wish" (l. 24). These words suggest a cycle that cannot be broken. As the speaker concedes earlier, "the wish is out/ of control. The wish can be viewed from many angles" (ll. 8-9). This final repetition underscores its omnipresence. The wish infiltrates every space: home, body, mind, dreams — offering no relief. It encapsulates not only grief but the desperate, unfulfilled longing for the return of the lost. Whitehead rightly asserts that "The Wish" represents the speaker's enduring connection to the dead. Though memory may fade, the pain of Otto's loss remains preserved, an immutable force that neither time nor language can erase (Whitehead 2023: 386).

7. Conclusion

An Aviary of Small Birds is an elegiac sequence that explores the specific terrain of maternal loss. Karen McCarthy Woolf's collection gives voice to a unique form of grief: the devastating mourning of a stillborn child, Otto. What sets this grief apart is not only its intensity, but also the absence of shared memories or a lived past with the deceased. This absence intensifies the challenges traditionally posed by the elegy form — particularly the limitations of language in articulating loss, the inadequacy of poetry to offer true consolation and the impossibility of recreating or retrieving the lost one through writing.

Poems such as "My Limbs Beat Against the Glass", "Starlight" and "White Butterflies" articulate the speaker's recognition of the inadequacy of language to represent a woman whose baby is stillborn. Although she experiences herself as a mother, both the look of others and her own internalised scrutiny undermine this self-perception. In "The Undertaker", "Morbleu", and "Mort-Dieu", the speaker engages in futile attempts at consolation, which prove elusive and ephemeral; nevertheless, she perseveres, continuing her search for the lost child. As we observe in "Missing", "The Calf" and "An Aviary of Small Birds", the speaker fantasises about the baby's absence, refusing to accept the finality of death. The concluding poems, "Tasting Note for Grief #17" and "The Wish", confirm the speaker's defeat: her grief over the stillborn continues, its insidious presence likened to a wine stain or an unfulfilled wish.

McCarthy Woolf constructs a landscape of grief that is marked by silence, stasis and a refusal to be comforted. The poems do not offer redemption but instead dwell in the persistence of pain. The speaker finds no solace in religion, ritual or even language; rather, she is drawn towards images of descent —into water, into the earth— as a form of dissolution that mirrors her internal collapse. Recurring motifs of whiteness and weightlessness suggest a desire to transcend the physical suffering of loss, yet even nature, which momentarily offers glimpses of relief, fails to provide enduring comfort. Through close readings and formal analysis, this article highlights the often-unspoken experience of motherhood without a child, revealing a poetic sequence that refuses closure and resists healing.

Works Cited

Cooper Davis, Alison. 2008. "Retaining the Phantom: Desire, Sympathy and the Rhetoric of the Elegy". *The Hardy Society Journal* 4 (1): 30-43.

Goss, Rebecca. 2019. "The Dark Hollow of her Pram". *Poetry Review* 109 (3): 135-144.

Kennedy, David. 2007. *Elegy*. Routledge.

McCarthy Woolf, Karen. 2014. *An Aviary of Small Birds*. Carcanet.

McCarthy Woolf, Karen. 2015. "How I Did It: 'Mort-Dieu'". *Poetry School*. <https://poetryschool.com/poems/how-i-did-it-mort-dieu/>. Accessed September 20, 2024.

Montassine, Pauline. 2023. "'The Shape of Your Absence': Coming to Terms with Loss and Grief in Margaret Atwood's *The Door* and Other Works". *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* (94): 109-126. <https://doi.org/10.4000/eccs.6573>.

Norwood, Tamarin. 2021. "Metaphor and Neonatal Death: How Stories Can Help When a Baby Dies at Birth". *Life Writing* 18 (1): 113-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2021.1871705>.

Ramazani, Jahan. 1994. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. The University of Chicago Press.

Reddick, Yvonne. 2022. "Seasonal Disturbances. An Interview with Poet Karen McCarthy Woolf". *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 29 (1): 181-189. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa052>.

Regan, Stephen. 2021. "The Elegy". In Görtschacher, Wolfgang and David Malcolm (eds.) *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960-2015*. Wiley-Blackwell: 119-127. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118843215.ch2b.3>.

Sacks, Peter M. 1985. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Johns Hopkins U.P. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801832543>.

Spargo, R. Clifton. 2010. "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy". In Weisman, Karen (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*. Oxford U.P.: 413-429. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199228133.013.0024>.

Uppal, Priscila. 2008. *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*. McGill-Queen's U.P. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773577138>.

Whitehead, Anne. 2023. "'Your Tiny White Vests, Unworn': Contemporary Elegies of Maternal Loss". *Literature and Medicine* 41 (2): 372-390. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2023.a921568>.

Received: 30/05/2025
Accepted: 18/12/2025

VICEROY'S HOUSE: DISCERNING WHO THE VICTORS ARE

VICEROY'S HOUSE: QUIÉN ESCRIBE LA HISTORIA

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611623

E. GUILLERMO IGLESIAS-DÍAZ
Universidad de las Islas Baleares
guillermo.iglesias@uib.eu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3970-3972

Abstract

Gurinder Chadha's 2017 film *Viceroy's House* opens with the quote attributed to Winston Churchill, "History is written by the victors". With this provocative beginning, Chadha seems to aim for a strong reaction and, indeed, a review of the critical response to the film suggests that Chadha garnered attention from voices on all sides of the historic events depicted in the film. The film was received with bitter criticism, especially from Muslim and Hindu critics, who considered it an attempt to whitewash Mountbatten's actions in the Partition of India and the terrible consequences of that decision. However, I contend that the victors in the film are Gurinder Chadha's family and the survivors of Partition, and that she uses *herstory* to pay homage to those who suffered the consequences of the decision. Furthermore, Chadha includes narrative and formal devices to underscore that her narration and knowledge are situated, rather than claiming to provide a transparent and objective account of the events that took place in the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The focus of my critical approach, then, will be the analysis of these devices and how the filmmaker ultimately challenges 'historical facts' or any attempt at offering the definitive version of history in order to problematise Churchill's statement and the official British account of Partition.

Keywords: diaspora, hybridity, *herstory*, situated knowledge, self-conscious film narrative.

Resumen

Sobre una pantalla en negro, antes de que aparezca ninguna imagen y con apenas un leve murmullo de fondo, la película *Viceroy's House* (2017) de Gurinder Chadha comienza con la afirmación atribuida a Churchill: "La historia la escriben los vencedores". Con este comienzo, Chadha parece querer provocar la reacción del público y si atendemos a las críticas que recibió el film, podemos afirmar que todas las partes involucradas en los hechos históricos relatados se vieron interpeladas, y no siempre de manera positiva: la película recibió duras reseñas, especialmente por parte de las comunidades musulmanas e hindúes que consideraron que la única intención de la directora era la de blanquear la responsabilidad de Mountbatten en la Partición de India y las terribles consecuencias de esa decisión. Sin embargo, a lo largo de las siguientes páginas intentaré demostrar que, realmente, quien vence en la película es la familia de Gurinder Chadha y, por extensión, quienes sobrevivieron a la Partición y que la cineasta utiliza su relato como forma de homenajear a las víctimas de aquella nefasta decisión política. De hecho, Chadha incluye a lo largo del film recursos formales y narrativos que nos recuerdan que su narración y su conocimiento se encuentran 'situados' y que para nada pretende ofrecer una versión 'objetiva' de los hechos acaecidos en el subcontinente asiático en 1947. El objetivo de mi propuesta, así pues, es el análisis de esos recursos y de cómo la directora intenta en última instancia cuestionar la 'historia fáctica' o cualquier intento de ofrecer la versión definitiva de la Historia.

Palabras clave: diáspora, hibridismo, *herstoria*, conocimiento situado, narración cinematográfica auto-consciente.

1. Introduction: Diaspora on the Move

In 2017, coinciding with the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of India's independence, British South Asian filmmaker Gurinder Chadha released her only explicitly political work to date dealing with the home country of her ancestors. The only other film of Chadha's set in India, her romantic comedy *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), is very different in tone and subject matter. The more recent film places at the centre of the narrative one of the most painful events in the history of the South Asian subcontinent, the Partition of the territory into two nation-states, India and Pakistan, right at the moment its people were freed from British colonial rule. Taking into account its subject matter, the title of the film is somewhat provocative: *Viceroy's House* makes reference to the location —actual and symbolic— of imperial power. The Viceroy's residence in New Delhi was a locus for the reinforcement of colonial rule and, at the same time, with its imposing architecture, it stood as a spatial expression of imperial dominance. Considering that the film focuses on India's independence and the aftermath of Partition, Chadha's choice of title might seem an odd one. However, this decision seems deliberately provocative. Indeed, she succeeds in doing so —not only through the title itself, but also through the intertitle that precedes the film, featuring the dictum (wrongly) attributed to Churchill: "History is written by the victors". One of the first cultural critics to react to Chadha's provocation was Fatima Bhutto (2017), who, in an article published in *The Guardian* on the day of the film's release, described it as one "of a deeply colonized imagination" and "a servile pantomime", and accused Chadha of placing the blame for Partition exclusively on the Muslim community and its leader at the time, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This article will assess the extent to which these criticisms are justified by focusing on two aspects: Gurinder Chadha's role as a diasporic filmmaker on the one hand and, on the other, discerning who the victors really are in this version of *herstory*. In the course of my analysis, I will aim to show how, because *Viceroy's House* is Chadha's *herstory*, she, her family and, by extension, those who suffered the terrible consequences of Partition become the true victors in the film.

Gurinder Chadha may be considered a true daughter of the diaspora: she was born in Nairobi, Kenya, although she defines herself as "a self-identified Punjabi [who] migrated to England at an early age and settled in Southhall in the sixties" (Desai 2004: 130). While it is beyond the scope of this article to survey the expansive body of diasporic literature, it is nonetheless necessary to reflect on the significance of the concept and its implications in light of recent political and social developments, including the following: the resurgence of the worst version of English nationalism, leading to Brexit; Trumpism and its anti-Muslim and anti-migratory politics; the rise of ultraconservative parties in Europe and beyond; and what euphemistically is referred to in the wealthy Northern and Western countries as the 'migrant crisis'. All these should be reason enough to, paraphrasing Donna Haraway (2016), 'stay with the trouble', particularly at a time when academia urges scholars to adopt the latest, most in vogue theoretical frameworks.

Before the release of *Viceroy's House* in 2017, Chadha had burst onto the British film scene with productions in which she grappled with the difficulties of growing up in a gendered and racialised body in the UK (or, as was the case in her 1993 film *What's Cooking*, in the US). Since the release of her 1986 short film, *I'm British But…*, films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *What's Cooking* (2000), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2004) and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010) have relocated diasporic female characters and their everyday lives out of the margins they usually inhabit, both in the real and cinematic worlds. As many other diasporic filmmakers, her 'accented films' have since then taken on "subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location[s]" (Naficy 2001: 4). Her success both inside and outside the UK turned Chadha into the British diasporic filmmaker *par excellence*, together with (script)writer Hanif Kureishi, who had started his career in the previous decade. In this sense, Chadha's films offer "a unique overview of the debate on (post-)national British cinema, as a cultural practice that challenges monolithic understandings of nationhood, and instead gestures to a transnational ethos" (Mendes 2007: 98).

However, as is the case with other diasporic women directors who have challenged 'monolithic understandings', such as Mira Nair or Deepa Mehta, Chadha was soon the object of harsh criticism, accused of oversimplifying complex issues related to individual and collective identities and of using stereotyped characters in her works. But being celebratory or entertaining does not have to be necessarily coterminous with superficial or simplistic, as Naficy has stated:

> displacement creates its own peculiar spectatorial environment that produces different demands and expectations, which are torqued not only by market forces but also by nationalist politics and by politics of ethnic representation. While the general public may prefer accented films that are entertaining and enlightening, […] displaced communities often demand "authentic" and corrective representations. Such conflicting demands may "distort" the accented films, exposing them to criticism from all sides. (2001: 6)

Bidisha Banerjee, in her analysis of diasporic women's autobiographies, asserts that "the diasporic woman's identity is always already fractured and for her […] the process of subject formation lies in celebrating the fracture rather than attempting to cure it" (2022: 1212). Following Banerjee's ideas, Chadha is the paradigmatic example of a diasporic woman celebrating that fracture: ever since she entered the film industry, her narratives have challenged, as many other diasporic artists do, "any notion of a unified, central subject who has complete autonomy and authority in presenting the self" (Banerjee 2022: 1212), with stories brimming with affection, good humour and irony.

Ann Kaplan points out that there are two main strategies in/for 'diasporan' filmmaking: "Some undertake an ideological project of reversing the oppressive gaze (and as such remain to a certain extent within the parameters of western structures)", while some other films, which she labels the 'healing' ones, "seek to see from the perspective of the oppressed, the diasporan, without specifically confronting the oppressor's strategies" (1997: 221). I argue that Chadha's narratives fit into the category of 'healing films', with *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) as a paradigmatic example —considered as a way of embracing "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life" (Gilroy 2004: xi). Gilroy defends "the radical openness that brings conviviality alive" in order to make "a nonsense of closed, fixed and reified identity" (Gilroy 2004: xi). Chadha's films support Gilroy's belief in the 'radical openness' of conviviality, which is closely related to the radical use of the term 'hybrid' that Jigna Desai proposes in her often-quoted work on South Asian diasporic filmmakers entitled *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (2004). Desai understands this term not as a simplistic "apolitical mixing" or some mediated kind of assimilation to "dominant forms" (2004: 219), taking Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1984) as an example of a film that "seeks to work against the binary of Indian/Western in framing itself in terms of multiple and fragmented British Asian hybridity. Hence, it constitutes itself more through an understanding of racial politics of Britain than it does with the deterritorialized national politics" (2004: 128). Hardt and Negri seem to agree with Desai on the political strength of the hybrid when they state that hierarchical order is founded on binary classifications and that

> the mere fact of hybridity has the power to destroy hierarchy *tout court*. Hybridity itself is a realized politics of difference, setting differences to play across boundaries. This is where the postcolonial and the postmodern most powerfully meet: in the united attack on the dialectics of modern sovereignty and the proposition of liberation as a politics of difference. (2000: 145)

According to Desai, since the 1980s diaspora has been variously defined in discourse as a "response to exclusionary and racist national narratives" and as the "'third space' of postcolonial migration" (2004: vi). Later, in the 1990s, diasporic communities were "hailed as a deterritorialized geopolitical community succeeding the nation in an age of increasing globalization" (vi). This way, the diaspora was to be understood "in postcolonial and feminist discourse as antinational and postnational" (vi), as the very existence of the diasporic and the hybrid questions traditional understandings of the nation.

It is probably for this reason that, even nowadays, hybridity is still thought of as synonym of "the impure mixings propagated by the dissolution of political, geographic, ethnic, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries" (Kapchan and Strong 1999: 239). The term hybrid, when applied to humans, is defined as "a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) but, as is usually the case with dictionaries, the definition is simplistic and reductionist. If one refers to "a blend of two", it may lead us to think of those "two" as perfectly homogeneous, differentiated units. However, as numerous scholars have agreed (Kureishi 1990; Said 1993; Bhabha 1994; Maalouf 1999; Brah and Coombes 2000), when talking of hybrid individuals, their identities are imbricated and intertwined in such a way that dividing the 'entity' in two (or three, or any given number according to their cultural background) would entail the end of the individual, as there would be no 'id-entity' left. Accordingly, my analysis draws on the concept of intersectionality, emerging from the foundational statement on interlocking oppressions proposed by the Combahee River Collective in 1977 and developed by Black and Chicana feminist thinkers like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), Angela Davis (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Barbara Smith (1998) and bell hooks (2014), among others.

Despite the persistence of groups resisting our quintessentially hybrid nature, culture and even existence, the future will be hybrid or, simply, it will not be: the most resistant animals or plants are hybrid (Brauer et al. 2023: 284) and, as Donna Haraway stated in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "we are all chimeras, fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (1991: 150). It is my contention that, in the same way, the most successful communities are and will be the ones who embrace Gilroy's notion of 'conviviality'. Conviviality, according to Gilroy,

> introduces a measure of distance from the pivotal term "identity", which has proved to be such an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity, and politics [and, I would add, gender too]. The radical openness [of] conviviality turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification. (2004: xi)

Chadha is perfectly aware of how her own persona, her racialised and gendered body, along with the focus on diversity she offers in her films, disturb unified, homogenising definitions of individual and collective identities. In fact, she seems to have vindicated what Gilroy defines as "the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification". Consequently, her work can be inscribed among those "cultural, political, and theoretical 'cartographies' of South Asian diasporas, transnationalities that are disjointed, heterogeneous, and hybrid rather than stable, unified, or coherent" (Desai 2004: 4). Continuing with Gilroy's notion of conviviality, this concept resonates with that of Roberto Esposito's *communitas* and his approach to community. This concept does not follow traditional ideas about 'belonging' (i.e. the individual belongs to the nation and the nation belongs to the individuals), but, instead, Esposito goes deeper into the etymology of the *cum-munus*, understanding the concept 'munus' as both a gift and a duty, an obligation (Esposito 2009: 4-5) towards the other. In dialogue with Esposito, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests (2010: 104-105) that we should understand the condition of 'being-togetherness' not as something that originates from a subject, whether individual or collective. In other words, being-togetherness is not a collective made up of 'being-subjects', because there is no individual subject beyond the *communitas*: if there is an 'I' it is because there is a 'we' and, actually, if there is a 'we' it is because there are other 'we'(s) that must be acknowledged. As Gilroy insists,

> Recalibrating approaches to culture and identity so that they are less easily reified […] seems a worthwhile short-term ambition that is compatible with the long-term aims of a reworked and politicized multiculturalism. Indeed, it is doubly welcome because it requires the renunciation of the cheap appeals to absolute national and ethnic difference that are currently fashionable. (2004: 6)

In the context of political polarisation that took hold in the beginning of the twenty-first century and continues today, it is hardly surprising that Chadha's *Viceroy's House* became, soon after its release, the target of fierce criticism, dealing as it does with one of the most traumatic events in the recent history of the South Asian subcontinent.

2. Heritage, Industry and Reception

Chadha has always claimed both her Punjabi family roots and her Britishness (despite its racist, colonial history). The filmmaker has never been shy in expressing her love for the British audio-visual tradition, be it "those epic films" such as *Gosford Park* (2001) or TV series like *Downton Abbey* or *Upstairs/Downstairs*, and she talks in the first person when she says in the production notes for *Viceroy's House* that these films and TV series "tell us who we are by going back, looking at our history to understand our present. That is exactly what I wanted to achieve here, to reach out to the broadest audience possible and remind them of this hugely important event that has been largely forgotten" (2017a: 6).

In answer to the criticisms over her use of the conventions of the heritage film in *Viceroy's House*, she conceded in an interview that she very much enjoyed "the mischievousness of taking one of Britain's great traditions and Indianising it" (in Mendes 2007: 101). Chadha seems to ignore not only those British purists who did not accept her approach to the British film tradition due to her diasporic origin, but also those others who accuse her of betraying her roots for being too close to white Britishness. However, as Kaplan pointed out, when dealing with filmic traditions, "representational systems are not so easily undone. It takes work from within such systems to begin to change them" (1997: 19). While not focusing on the hybridity of the film in formal terms, it is relevant for my argument to point out that its narrative style results "from intertwining different genres and cinematographic traditions. Such hybridity […] questions other hegemonic global accounts of past and present history and memory" (Oliete-Aldea 2021: 177). In my opinion, it is this interweaving of genres and her self-conscious look that will give us the key to understand Chadha's approach to narrative as *herstory*. It is precisely because of the trauma still haunting the (national) communities involved in Partition that these events resist narrativisation. In Judith Butler's words, "enormous trauma […] undermines narrative capacity" (2004: 7). Moreover, in relation to the difficulty of narrativising trauma, Slavoj Žižek argues that any given "symbolic field is always by definition […] structured around a central void/impossibility" and adds that even a "personal life-narrative" is nothing but a "*bricolage* of ultimately failed attempts to come to terms with some trauma" (in Laclau and Mouffe 2000: 125).

Paraphrasing Radhika Mohanram, no museum or monument in India honours the millions of victims caused by the conflict (2011: 918-921). Mohanram describes the horrors endured by the population at length, including the loss of two million lives. Moreover, she offers a special remembrance to the devastating number of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women (around one hundred thousand) "from both sides of the border [who] were abducted, mutilated, raped and impregnated" (Mohanram 2011: 921). In the same way, John Hutnyk points out that it was not until 2017 that the "Museum of Partition" was launched in Amritsar by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust of India as "a permanent tribute to victims in Pakistan, India or Bangladesh". Its inauguration prompts "questions as to why Partition had not hitherto excited the same official remembrance as the Jewish holocaust" (Hutnyk 2018: 611-612). This likely speaks to the level of shame that still haunts the communities involved in the events, and the reason why "this other history of trauma, grief, loss, diaspora and separation […] is not articulated in the narrative of Indian nationalism and Independence, for doing so would completely undercut the more acceptable and triumphant event of Independence" (Mohanram 2011: 921).

Given that history is a contested terrain —and in the case of Partition, a deeply painful one— it is hardly surprising that Chadha was accused of distorting the past. Critics claimed she was biased against the Muslim community and, perhaps most controversially, sympathetic to British colonialists. As a consequence, the film has been at the heart of the controversy and the filmmaker has been accused of manipulating history and, as noted above, of being particularly harsh in her criticism of the leader of the Muslim League and the community he represented. As shown in the film, Muhammad Ali Jinnah's unswerving attitude and his demand for an independent state for the Muslims was a must in the negotiations to put an end to colonial rule. In addition, there was criticism about the benevolent portrayal of the last Viceroy of India and all the members of the Mountbatten family. Thus, in this sense, Chadha could be considered a 'shifter':

> In linguistics, shifters are words, such as "I" and "you", whose reference can be understood only in the context of the utterance. More generally, a shifter is an "operator" in the sense of being dishonest, evasive, and expedient, or even being a "mimic", in the sense that Homi Bhabha formulated, as a producer of critical excess, irony, and sly civility (1994). (Naficy 2001: 32)

However, beyond her alleged 'dishonesty' or 'mimicry', I do believe Chadha is a producer of "critical excess, irony and sly civility" and I agree with Hutnyk when he describes the film's portrayal of all the participants in the negotiations as "unsympathetic" (2018: 617). Contrary to the accusation that Chadha is biased against the Muslim community, it is particularly telling that the only leader receiving a slap in the face for the catastrophic consequences of Partition is Nehru and "his upper Hindu elite 'Cambridge debating skills'" (Hutnyk 2018: 617). By the end of the film (Chadha 2017b: min. 94), the audience is shown how the recently-proclaimed first Prime Minister of independent India arrives to the refugee camp where thousands of people gather looking for shelter due to the forced displacement of Hindus from Muslim areas. As soon as he gets out of the vehicle, somebody approaches him and without a word strikes him in the face. No words are needed to understand that Nehru is blamed, too, for the humanitarian calamity.

The film narrates the arrival of the last Viceroy of India, who is charged with overseeing the process of India's independence. As a result of the hasty and irresponsible actions of those in power at the time, violent conflicts erupt across the country between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. The focalisers of the narration are Jeet and Aalia (played respectively by Manish Dayal and Huma Qureshi), a young couple who work at the Viceroy's House —the very location that gives the movie its title and where most of the action unfolds. As Chadha has declared in several interviews, the "legacy of Partition" continues to have enormous relevance in Britain nowadays and, even though "the events of 1947 are largely forgotten in the UK" (in Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 25-26), she considers her film a way "to bring attention to such a pivotal moment in South Asian (and British) history and to address all the parties involved in Partition with the stated aim of offering 'a message of reconciliation' that would speak to Indians, Pakistanis and British people alike" (25-26).

I find it pertinent to recall the words of Esposito here, when he states that "yesterday as well as today (indeed more so today than yesterday), community appears to be marked, indeed saturated with communitarianism, patriotism, and local and factional interest" (Esposito 2009: 16). However, when he speaks of the *communitas*, he refers to "not only something different" from the community, but also of the vindication of the "'impropriety' of the common, when the reference to the 'proper', or the voice of the 'authentic', or the assumption of being pure, reappears" (16). Esposito reminds us that "*communis* (always referring to its earliest meaning) meant in addition to 'vulgar' and 'of the people', also 'impure'" (16). It is my conviction that Chadha is closer to Esposito's understanding of the *communitas* than to accepted formulations of the national community and, consequently, her film was received with fierce criticism at a time when Brexit-related sentiments were front and centre.

In this way, at least since the latest so-called 'financial crisis' in 2008, hegemonic nationalist discourse has gained force —from Trump's "make America great again", to Brexit, Putin's authoritarian rule in Russia or the rise of far-right political parties all over Europe and beyond— and, for this reason, recuperating the relevance of the hybrid and the diasporic may seem as revolutionary as ever. Chadha translates her condition as a hybrid individual to *Viceroy's House* and has referred to it as "her own 'upstairs and downstairs' film in the tradition of *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*" (in Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 23). She has described herself as a fan of the heritage film genre, and declared in an interview that she wanted "her films to be representative of the 'new' national cinema", rejecting the idea of defining British film industry in dualities of the kind seen in "*Howard's End*" vs. "*My Beautiful Launderette*" (in Mendes 2007: 99). As Hamid Naficy points out when analysing "Chadha's hybridized and exuberant *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993)", she celebrates the "pleasure and playfulness in hybridization. [The film] is fundamentally about being British but also about being dual, even multiple", focusing as it does "on the heterogeneous lives of a group of Asian women" (Naficy 2001: 93). After her adaptation of Jane Austen in *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha 2004), I consider Chadha's *Viceroy's House* another pivotal step in claiming her right to inscribe her name in the British film tradition (see Oliete-Aldea 2012, 2021).

3. Gurinder's *Herstory* of Partition

As mentioned above, in the film Chadha deals with one of the most traumatic events in the history of the South Asian subcontinent, whose scars remain more than visible nowadays, with feelings of shame and remorse still lingering among the national communities involved in the infamous events around the time of Partition. For this reason, Chadha seems to embrace Haraway's understanding of the notion of 'staying with the trouble': *"Trouble* is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning 'to stir up', 'to make cloudy', 'to disturb'. We —all of us on Terra— live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response" (2016: 1).

Haraway adds that these "mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy —with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy"— and that it is our response-ability "to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (2016: 1). And this seems, from my point of view, precisely what Chadha intended with *Viceroy's House*: on the one hand, 'staying with the trouble', 'making trouble' and 'disturbing' many of the assumptions and shared fictions taken for granted surrounding Partition. On the other hand, she assumes the task of 'making kin' as 'to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places'.

Having said this, among all the actors involved in the negotiations portrayed in the film, it is my contention that the British receive the most negative representation. We are witness to their racism, as when Mountbatten contemptuously quotes Churchill describing Ghandi as a "half-naked fakir" (Chadha 2017b: min. 7), to which Mrs. Mountbatten replies, affirming ironically that the "British Empire [was] brought to its knees by a man in a loincloth". Later (Chadha 2017b: min. 20), while waiting for the recently arrived Viceroy, a group of officials and governors discusses how "this hatred between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims is poisoning everything we've built", adding that "these ragged Indians won't agree" to form a government. In that same dialogue, in "line with the culture of the empire, […] zoological tropes" are employed (Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 28), describing Indians "as slippery as eels" (Chadha 2017b: min. 20), which Clini and Valančiūnas consider "a discursive device to strip colonised subjects of their humanity so to justify colonialism" (2021: 28). British arrogance and their contempt for the Indian people are also on display, as when a British official doubts 'Indian people' will be able to run the country's administration, legal system or its army (Chadha 2017b: min. 42). However, the most controversial sequence in terms of 'historical accuracy' regarding the role of the British in the negotiations takes place near the end of the film. At this point, it is revealed that the plan to divide the subcontinent into two religiously defined nations was not imposed on the British by the leaders of those (allegedly irreconcilable) communities, but was actually a strategy devised by Churchill's administration to maintain control over strategic colonial interests in the area. According to Clini and Valančiūnas, "Chadha follows the events as narrated in Narendra Singh Sarila's book, *The Shadow of the Great Game* (2006)" (2021: 28) and in the episode as presented in the film (Chadha 2017b: min. 84), "General Ismay in particular is portrayed as the brutal face of the Empire: he is not concerned about the human cost of Partition, but rather wants to leave the country as soon as possible and make the most of it by dividing the country in two and securing British access to the Arab Sea via Pakistan" (Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 28).

Despite the criticisms, this contested revelation offered Chadha a pathway into *herstory* —a means of challenging official history and the version she had been taught at school in London, namely that Partition had been "the fault of the warring Indians" as well as the view held by many of her relatives that it had been "principally the fault of Mountbatten" (Chadha 2016).

In this sense, the filmmaker makes clear from the start where her allegiances lie: the film opens and finishes with the protagonists of the love story, Jeet and Aalia (he is Hindu and she, Muslim), a young couple who, against all odds, breaks the barriers imposed on them by religion, family and history, and end up together.

However, rather than merely fulfilling the expectation of a mandatory 'happy ending' in commercial film narratives, the final scene can be interpreted as part of Chadha's self-reflexive narrative strategy. This ending resonates with Ernst Bloch's *principle of hope*, as it underscores how "the apparent darkness surrounding us is a necessary precondition for the sparks of hope and the preilluminations of utopia to glow more brightly in the future" (Thompson 2013a: 11). Thus, Chadha's *herstory* is marked by an affective turn that, as Michael Hardt points out, "does draw attention to the body and emotions" and involves "both reason and the passions" (in Clough 2007: ix). The connections between the principle of hope and the affective turn become more apparent when Patricia Clough points out that the latter brings "forth ghosted bodies and the traumatized remains of erased histories. It also sends thought to the future" (Clough 2007: 3). Thus, since the early moments in the film, we witness an ecology of affects traversing the narrative, a net of sentimental relations that go well beyond the love story between Aalia and Jeet: the first scenes of the film focus on the friendship between Jeet and Duleep, a relationship that will be interrupted only by the Partition. The Mountbattens, as a family, are also portrayed as one full of affection and complicity between all its members. In addition to this, Jeet shows Aalia's father love and respect, feelings that are mutual since the moment Jeet takes care of the old man while he is imprisoned by the British.

It is my conviction that this affective approach in the film partially provoked the criticism explained throughout this article, especially by mainstream reviewers who insisted on the lack of factual accuracy as one of the film's most egregious flaws. These critics seem to ignore what postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon convincingly suggested some decades ago, namely that, in contrast to a traditional understanding of history as the objective recollection of past events, we should approach history as a textual construction, as the only way we can access it is through texts. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon problematised the textual nature of history (1989: 87-101): history is not there waiting for the expert to grasp it, put it into words and offer it to the world as unmediated and transparent truth. In any given text, the narrative strategies are always present, with some 'characters' and 'actors' occupying central positions, while others will inevitably inhabit the margins, in the same way that some facts and figures will be included while others will be left out. Both history and fiction writing share a "common use of conventions of narrative, […] of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology […]. In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken" (Hutcheon 1989: 106). If history is to be defined, we could say it is first and foremost a situated discourse and, as such, a construction. Paraphrasing Hutcheon, this does not imply a desire to dismiss history as a whole or to deny the existence of the past: simply, a distinction should be made between events and facts (16). While the former refer to actual situations, they are turned into facts by corseting them into narrativisation processes. Taken to the extreme, even eyewitnesses are texts, inasmuch as everybody, as individuals, is crisscrossed by our historical (socioeconomic, gendered and cultural) context (16). This is, of course, connected to Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledges' and 'feminist objectivity'. According to Haraway, "we seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism [...] and disembodied vision"; instead, our "nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word" should be discarded to embrace knowledges "ruled by partial sight and limited voice. We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (1991: 196).

In line with Hutcheon's and Haraway's theories, Chadha has insisted on several occasions that her film does not pretend to be "the one true Word" about the events that took place at the time of Partition: "everyone sees history through their own lens [...]. My film is my vision of the events leading up to India's Partition" (2017c). This is Chadha's *herstory* and, as Patricia Waugh stated some decades ago, "the important thing is to *admit* one's authorship, *admit* the provisionality of one's constructions" (1993: 125, emphasis in original). Chadha's fragmented and self-reflexive strategies subvert, as is characteristic of accented cinema, "the master codes of realist aesthetics and race relation narratives, which had traditionally posited blacks and minorities as invisible problem figures or victims" (Naficy 2001: 88-89).

4. Cinematic Construction of Chadha's *Herstory*: Some Examples

This subversive approach is evident from the very beginning of the film. One of the clearest examples of how Chadha engages with history with a "critical gaze" (Halasz 2011: 30) is her portrayal of the Mountbatten family and the transfer of power ceremony.

The first time we see them is on a plane flying in to India (Chadha 2017b: min. 6), with Lord Mountbatten looking at himself in the mirror full of vanity, as his daughter points out when she tells him to stop "hogging the mirror". Of course, this is not to suggest that the Mountbattens are portrayed unsympathetically, but one might reasonably argue that there is no better way to describe what has been defined as "vertical empathy" (Martín-Lucas 2024: 85), understood as a kind of empathy that "can operate as a technique of white privilege and power" (Lobb

2022: 87). By introducing Lord Mountbatten and his family on a plane flying over the subcontinent, the filmmaker is subtly putting forward the distance between Mountbatten and the Indian people, coming, quite literally, 'out of the blue' with his family to 'bring freedom to India'. The images of the family as they survey the country through the aeroplane window underline with sharp precision the idea, problematising "the role of liberal white vertical empathy in the process of (de) colonisation" (Martín-Lucas 2024: 85).

Similarly, the staging of the sequence depicting the transfer of power ceremony clearly indicates Chadha's conscious decision to leave the imprint of her "look" (Kaplan 1997: 219) in the film through a series of "unreal objective shots" (Casetti and di Chio 1998: 247-248), starting with the arrival of Lord and Lady Mountbatten and their reception by Scottish bagpipers and a perfectly arranged crowd (Chadha 2017b: min. 7). The subject of the enunciation (Bettetini 1996: 30) enters the frame through an overhead shot, in a god-like style, with the red carpet unfolding, and the ritual of the Mountbattens descending from the carriage. There is nothing misleading in this sequence, as it deliberately presents imperial power in its full splendour, visually condensing a faithful and pompous representation of its defining characteristics into a single, concentrated instant. To draw our attention and foreground the moment —just before meeting the salient Viceroy and his wife— Lord and Lady Mountbatten are framed from below, in a low angle shot, rendering them larger than life. These are just some examples of the aesthetics Chadha introduces in her film, highlighting the narrative process involved. The approach reveals a playful combination of her critical gaze together with formal and narrative strategies drawn from Hollywood, British heritage cinema and Bollywood, all of which constitute her distinctive personal signature.

Chadha includes herself explicitly as a subject of enunciation, not seeking partiality "for its own sake" (Haraway 1991: 196), but precisely to situate her knowledge in a dialectical strategy and even at the risk of exposing herself to criticism, as was indeed the case. This can be perceived, for instance, in the scene where we watch Jeet and Aalia peeping through a keyhole into the room where Mountbatten is talking to Nehru (Chadha 2017b: min. 34), as if the two main characters were an extension of Chadha's gaze in the act of watching through the camera lens. There is no more effective or compelling way to illustrate the mediation between the production of images and their consumption: the filmmaker is stating that *herstory* is far removed from the well-trodden realist discourse and from the pervasive strategy of filmic transparency. Rather, she is asserting this is *her* reality, as *she* chooses to narrate it. In doing so, and in line with Haraway, Chadha appears to challenge one of the grand narratives of modernity (Lyotard 1979: 37-41), denouncing the assumption that, as is the case with the writing of history, "there has been no clear distinction between objective science and abusive ideology because the relations of knowledge and historical determinants require more complex concepts" (Haraway 1991: 67-68). Only by situating one's knowledge, Haraway argues, can a "larger vision" be achieved (Haraway 1991: 196).

On top of the formal and narrative devices analysed so far, Chadha's most interesting and explicit intervention in the film narrative is her use of documentary images: contrary to the widely held opinion that Chadha employs the Movietone newsreels to enhance the realism of her film or to underline that it is based on true events (see, for example, Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 23-24; Oliete-Aldea 2021: 181-182), I suggest these extracts are a formal strategy to precisely question how victors (in the case of these newsreels, the British) have traditionally written history. The documentary, as a genre, is the opposite of Haraway's situated knowledge: the male voiceover in classic documentaries is considered "almost an institution" (Silverman 1988: 163), "a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge" (Silverman 1988: 48). As decolonial, transmodern thinkers remind us, the "disembodied and unlocated neutrality and objectivity of the ego-politics of knowledge is a Western myth" (Grosfoguel 2011). Chadha openly challenges this official history written by the victors of coloniality and their ego-politics.

She does so by using two kinds of newsreel images for different but related purposes. On the one hand, there are those in which the manipulation of the images is evident, with the actors inserted in existing filmed records of the events depicted. This is the case, for example, of the meeting between the Mountbattens and Gandhi (Chadha 2017b: min. 43), and their visit to the Punjab. On the other hand, Chadha uses what seems to be actual footage from British newsreels to depict riots in the streets of what then was known as Bombay (Mumbai, since 1995) and Delhi (min. 66), masses of people moving painfully (min. 92), or children crying in despair (min. 93), all examples of the devastating consequences of Partition. I contend that Chadha includes the newsreels to denounce not only the cruelty and pain inflicted on the population, but also to highlight how easily, in both cases, images are manipulated to create a particular reality in the interest of those producing them. If the documentary images in the first instance —with the faces of the actors inserted in real footage— help to construct a cinematic reality according to the filmmaker's interests, in the second case, it is the British propaganda that accommodates reality to their colonial interests. Such discursive framework implies, for instance, that the uncivilised and violent people of India were unfit to govern themselves because, as Churchill infamously described them, they are "a beastly people with a beastly religion" (in Chadha 2016).

5. Conclusion

As “a British-Indian woman” Chadha has expressed distrust over Churchill’s statement “History is written by the victors” and, to express it mildly, she doubted that the statesman had her “in mind when he said [it]” (Chadha 2016). The evidence examined in this article suggests that *Viceroy’s House* is Chadha’s *herstory*, in which the filmmaker foregrounds what has been without doubt one of the most grievous events in the recent history of India. Her intervention is centred from the outset by the provocative intertitle, “History is written by the victors”, which frames the film as a conscious reworking of historical narrative and asserts the validity of her perspective. While the film received, as is usually the case with ‘accented’ filmmakers, harsh criticism from all sides involved, Chadha’s intention to re-write the events and challenge the ‘facts’ of the official history should be clear by now. By deploying narrative and formal strategies —from the use of subaltern focalisers and mixing film genres, to self-conscious frames and the manipulation of images— the director invites us to reflect critically on those who have traditionally taken the blame for the Partition of India and its terrible consequences (the ‘warring Indians’ or Mountbatten’s ineptitude). As discussed in my reading of the sequence in the film, Chadha has engaged with those voices who point their accusing finger at General Ismay’s haste in leaving India and, following Churchill’s orders to protect British commercial interests, promoted the Partition of India by marking random lines on a map and without taking into account any criteria beyond the Empire’s interests.

In opposition to such meanness, the film’s closing sequence, as has been already mentioned, resonates with Bloch’s principle of hope: the German philosopher spoke of our need to be educated in hope and, according to Thompson, hope is “also the means by which we reach beyond pessimistic nihilism to give purpose to an existence which is objectively purposeless in any transcendental sense” (2013a: 7). Bloch “argued that a desire to move forward out of necessity and into freedom was an essential human characteristic, the ‘invariant of direction’, as he called it” (Thompson 2013b: 82). After an escalating melodramatic moment, Jeet and Aalia, the two lovers of irreconcilable religious faiths at that historical moment, finally get together after enduring endless misfortunes (Chadha 2017b: min. 97). With this sequence, Chadha seems to offer a light of hope and reconciliation for the different communities in both her home and host nation, contrasting with what Bloch terms the “darkness of the living moment” (Thompson 2013a: 11). By highlighting the “articulation of possibilities for change and self-fashioning and the rejection and refashioning of the ‘badly existing’” (Ní Dhúill 2013: 154), the sequence exemplifies what Bloch considers one of the central aims of culture. The two lovers were set apart because of Partition and, due to Aalia's unswerving loyalty to her father, she flees with him to what will become the new nation-state of Pakistan, leaving Jeet behind. However, a terrorist attack on the train in which they are travelling leaves Aalia badly injured, and she arrives at a Hindu refugee camp. She is about to be expelled from the camp, as she does not 'belong' there due to her religion, when, while lying on the floor, she sees Jeet, who is volunteering at the camp. After some painful and suspenseful moments, she takes a microphone and calls her lover's name through the PA, who runs towards her in despair until they come together in a long embrace.

I read this happy ending as a determined vindication of hope and utopia on the part of Chadha, whose use of the strategy of the *deus ex machina* provides an alternative to the dictum of irreconcilable differences between the citizens of the new nations. To reinforce this hopeful vision, Chadha includes a series of intertitles, dedicating the film (2017b: min. 99) not only to those who died during the Partition —"One million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs", as she specifies— but also to those who survived it. Besides, immediately before the final credits (Chadha 2017b: min. 100), she inserts a set of photographs from her own family album. These images relate, in some way, to Jeet and Aalia's story, summarising the hardships her ancestors and many other families like hers endured before she was born. By doing so, Chadha connects past, present and future generations beyond religious ascription. In her view, those who outlived the consequences of British imperialism are the true victors in her *herstory*.

Acknowledgements

This research is part of the project "Communitas/Immunitas: Relational ontologies in Atlantic anglophone cultures of the 21st century" (PID2022-136904NB-I00) funded by MCIN/AEI/ (10.13039/501100011033) and by "ERDF A way of making Europe".

I would like to thank the reviewers and the editorial team for their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the overall quality of this article.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. Verso.

Banerjee, Bidisha. 2022. "'Alphabets of Flesh': Writing the Body and Diasporic Women's Autobiography in Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*". *English Studies* 103 (8): 1210-1227.

Bettetini, Gianfranco. 1996. *La conversación audiovisual*. Trans. V. Ponce. Ediciones Cátedra.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Bhutto, Fatima. 2017. "Fatima Bhutto on Indian Partition film *Viceroy's House*: I Watched This Servile Pantomime and Wept". *The Guardian* (March 3). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/03/fatima-bhutto-viceroys-house-watched-servile-pantomime-and-wept>. Accessed October 10, 2023.

Brah, Avtar and Annie E. Coombes. 2000. *Hybridity and its Discontents. Politics, Science, Culture*. Routledge.

Brauer, Chris J., Jonathan Sandoval-Castillo, Katie Gates, Michael P. Hammer, Peter J. Unmack, Louis Bernatchez and Luciano B. Beheregaray. 2023. "Natural Hybridization Reduces Vulnerability to Climate Change". *Natural Climate Change* 13: 282-289. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01585-1>.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.

Casetti, Francesco and Federico di Chio. (1991) 1998. *Cómo analizar un film*. Trans. C. Losilla. Paidós.

Chadha, Gurinder. 2016. "Gurinder Chadha on Viceroy's House: Why I Had to Make a Film about Partition". *The Guardian* (April 16). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/16/gurinder-chadha-on-viceroys-house-why-i-had-to-make-a-film-about-Partition>. Accessed October 10, 2023.

Chadha, Gurinder. 2017a. "*Viceroy's House*: Production Notes".

Chadha, Gurinder. 2017b. *Viceroy's House*. Cameo Media.

Chadha, Gurinder. 2017c. "Gurinder Chadha: My Film Has Been Wilfully Misrepresented as Anti-Muslim", in *The Guardian* (March 3). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2017/mar/03/gurinder-chadha-defends-viceroys-house-film-fatima-bhutto>. Accessed October 10, 2023.

Clini, Clelia and Deimantas Valančiūnas. 2021. "Diasporic Visions: Colonialism, Nostalgia and the Empire in Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House*". *South Asian Diaspora* 13 (1): 23-36 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1767894>.

Clough, Patricia Ticineto (ed). 2007. *The Affective Turn. Theorizing the Social*. Duke U.P.

The Combahee River Collective Statement. 2015. Library of Congress Web Archive. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>. Accessed April 1, 2026.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mappping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.

Davis, Angela Y. 1981. *Women, Race & Class*. Random House.

Desai, Jigna. 2004. *Beyond Bollywood. The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. Routledge.

Esposito, Roberto. 2009. *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Trans. T. Campbell. Stanford U.P.

Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *After Empire*. Routledge.

Grosby, Steven. 2005. *Nationalism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford U.P.

Greenberg, Aaron. 2016. "Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom". *Journal of Political Thought* 2: 22-39.

Grosfoguel, Ramón. 2011. "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality". *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.5070/T411000004>.

Halasz, Judith R. 2011. "Gender Politics and the Critical Gaze: Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculin-Feminin*". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1 (13): 26-32.

Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature.* Routledge.

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke U.P.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard U.P.

hooks, bell. 2014. *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743264>.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1989. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge.

Hutnyk, John. 2018. "Screen Violence and Partition". *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 19 (4): 610-626. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2018.1543287>.

Kapchan, Deborah A. and Pauline Turner Strong. 1999. "Theorizing the Hybrid". *The Journal of American Folklore* 112 (445): 239-253. <https://doi.org/10.2307/541360>.

Kaplan, E. Ann. 1997. *Looking for the Other. Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*. Routledge.

Kearney, Richard. 1997. *Postnationalist Ireland. Politics, Culture, Philosophy*. Routledge.

Khosla, Gopal Das. 1989. *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India*. Oxford U.P.

Kureishi, Hanif. 1990. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Faber & Faber.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (eds.). 2000. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Verso.

Lobb, Andrea. 2022. "The Empathiser's New Shoes. The Discomforts of Empathy as White Feminist Affect". In Kolehmainen, Marjo, Annukka Lahti and Kinneret Lahad (eds.) *Affective Intimacies*. Manchester U.P.: 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526158574.00011>.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1979. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Manchester U.P.

Maalouf, Amin. 1999. *Identidades asesinas*. Trans. F. Villaverde. Alianza Editorial.

Martín-Lucas, Belén. 2024. "Empathy, Response-ability and Decolonial Love: Learning Ethics of Relationality from Indigenous Feminisms". *European Journal of English Studies (EJES)* 28 (1): 83-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2024.2420947>.

Mendes, A.C. 2007. "*Bride & Prejudice* and the (Post-)national Cinema Debate". In Ceia, Carlos and Isabel Lousada (orgs.) *Novos Caminhos da História e da Cultura*. Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas: 95-103. <http://hdl.handle.net/10451/30222>. Accessed July 1, 2023.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hybrid>. Accessed July 1, 2024.

Mohanram, Radhika. 2011. "Gendered Spectre. Trauma, Cultural Memory and the Indian Partition". *Cultural Studies* 25 (6): 917-934. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.575263>.

Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Persephone Press.

Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *An Accented Cinema. Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton U.P.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2010. "Conloquium". *Minnesota Review* 2010 (75): 101-108. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-2010-75-101>.

Ní dhúill, Caitríona. 2013. "Engendering the Future: Bloch's Utopian Philosophy in Dialogue with Gender Theory". In Thompson, Peter and Slavoj Zizek (eds.): 144-163.

Oliete-Aldea, Elena. 2012. "Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*: A Transnational Journey Through Time and Space". *International Journal of English Studies* 12 (1): 167-182. <https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes.12.1.118181>.

Oliete-Aldea, Elena. 2021. "Gurinder's Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) and Other Evictions". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 83: 173-187. <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.83.13>.

Renan, Ernest. 1990. "What is a Nation?". In Bhabha, Homi (ed.) *Nation and Narration*. Routledge: 8-22.

Said, Edward W. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books.

Silverman, Kaja. 1988. *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories of Representation and Difference*. Indiana U.P.

Singh, Gurharpal. 1987. "Understanding the 'Punjab Problem'". *Asian Survey* 27 (12): 1268-1277.

Smith, Barbara. 1998. *Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom: The Truth that Never Hurts.* Rutgers U.P.

Thompson, Peter. 2013a. "Introduction: The Privatization of Hope and the Crisis of Negation". In Thompson, Peter and Slavoj Zizek (eds.): 1-20.

Thompson, Peter. 2013b. "Religion, Utopia, and the Metaphysics of Contingency". In Thompson, Peter and Slavoj Zizek (eds.): 82-105.

Thompson, Peter and Slavoj Zizek. (eds.) 2013. *The Privatization of Hope. Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia.* Duke U.P.

Waugh, Patricia. 1993. *Metafiction. Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Writing*. Routledge.

Received: 03/03/2025
Accepted: 06/02/2026

"PERSEVERE IT LIKE A MAN": RELATIONALITY, RESPECTABILITY AND MASCULINITY IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* (2016)

"PERSEVERE IT LIKE A MAN": RELACIONALIDAD, RESPETABILIDAD Y MASCULINIDAD EN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* (2016)

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611540

IAGO RODRÍGUEZ-DIÉGUEZ
Universidad de Vigo
iago.rodriguez.dieguez@uvigo.gal
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8382-1271

Abstract

African migration novels offer interesting views on gender, but scholarly analyses of these texts have not always adopted masculinity in their critical approach. Although immigrant tales are now receiving more attention, studies have overlooked the masculine as gendered, as something socially constructed and individually re-enacted. For this reason, I propose a reading of the novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), by Cameroonian author Imbolo Mbue, that aims to interrogate the masculine struggle of the character Jende Jonga. I use the term 'relational masculinities' to explore how the character's manhood is dependent on his relations with others. I will also include the concept of 'respectability' studied by Dominic Pasura and Anastasia Christou (2018) to underline that Jonga's masculinity relies heavily on his success as an African immigrant and father. This article argues that the protagonist's performance of masculinity hinges both on his ability to exert control within his inner circle and on his efforts to cultivate a respectable image in extended social circles. However, the pressures of migration within a white neoliberal context generate profound emotional strain, and the systemic obstacles he encounters ultimately thwart these aspirations. This study exemplifies how interdisciplinary approaches —drawing from literary analysis, gender theory and postcolonial critique— can enrich our understanding of new African diasporic fiction and open new possibilities for academic research.

Keywords: masculinity, relationality, respectability, migration novels, African literature, Imbolo Mbue, Cameroon, United States of America.

Resumen

Las novelas sobre la migración africana ofrecen perspectivas interesantes sobre el género, pero los enfoques críticos hacia estos textos literarios no siempre han adoptado la masculinidad como una disciplina académica digna de consideración para su análisis. Si bien es cierto que las historias sobre inmigración están recibiendo más atención actualmente, muchos estudios han pasado por alto el componente de género de lo masculino, obviando que la masculinidad es construida socialmente y representada de manera individual. Por este motivo, propongo una lectura de la novela *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), de la autora camerunesa Imbolo Mbue, que profundizará en la crisis de masculinidad vivida por el personaje de Jende Jonga. Para ello, usaré el término 'masculinidades relacionales' para examinar cómo su existencia como hombre depende de sus relaciones con los demás. Asimismo, incorporaré el concepto de 'respetabilidad', que han desarrollado los autores Dominic Pasura y Anastasia Christou (2018), para subrayar que su masculinidad se apoya en gran medida en su grado de éxito como inmigrante africano y figura paterna. Este artículo sostiene que la *performance* de la masculinidad de Jende Jonga depende tanto de su capacidad para ejercer control en su círculo íntimo como de sus esfuerzos por cultivar una imagen respetable en entornos sociales más amplios. Sin embargo, las presiones derivadas de la migración en un contexto neoliberal blanco le generan una profunda tensión emocional, y los obstáculos sistémicos con los que se encuentra terminan por socavar dichas aspiraciones. Este estudio ejemplifica cómo los enfoques interdisciplinares, que en este caso combinan análisis literario, teoría de género y crítica poscolonial, pueden enriquecer nuestra comprensión de la nueva ficción diaspórica africana al mismo tiempo que abren nuevas posibilidades para la investigación académica.

Palabras clave: masculinidad, relacionalidad, respetabilidad, novelas de migración, literatura africana, Imbolo Mbue, Camerún, Estados Unidos de América.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Black African diasporic fiction has shown its potential for portraying global mobility and transnational subjects in appealing ways. Scholarship on these texts has successfully analysed their treatment of race, class and otherness in narratives of migration. Nonetheless, it is necessary to continue examining these novels about Africans in the diaspora, for instance, by regarding men as truly gendered subjects with a particular set of preoccupations of their own.

Although traditional migration research has dealt almost exclusively with the lives of men, it has been claimed that "it has done so by examining men as non-gendered humans and it too has ignored the gendered dimensions of men's experiences" (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 5). New analyses must address this issue by means of "a stronger focus on treating gender less as a variable within the causes and experiences of migration and more as a central analytical concept" (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 5), to avoid oversimplification of the masculine identity. Doing so would likely reverse the current trend of stereotyping and dehumanisation, since migrant men are often "cast in negative and homogenizing light" (Charsley and Wray 2015: 404). Literary texts can be of key importance in challenging these stereotypes, as they allow us to read these identities more deeply, following personal ups and downs, demystifying but also problematising the lives of men.

Therefore, since the situation of migrant men is deserving of more widespread concern and scholarly attention (Charsley and Wray 2015), I maintain that fictional texts can become an appropriate tool "to fully explore the experiences of men *as men*" (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 4, emphasis in original). Thus, the aim of this essay is to analyse literary representations of Black African masculinities in contexts of transnational migration. To that end, this article will approach Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, as a narrative which not only explores the challenges of migration and the resulting reassessment of personal aspirations, but which also clearly articulates the crisis of masculinity experienced by a working-class Cameroonian immigrant father named Jende Jonga. Furthermore, the analysis engages critically with masculinity through the lens of emerging African diasporic identities, foregrounding the concepts of relationality and respectability —both of which serve as key analytical tools in unpacking gender dynamics within the text.

2. Relational Masculinities: Unravelling Men's Position from a Feminist Standpoint

Women and men are, in general terms, not treated equally, are certainly expected to behave differently, and are privileged or oppressed in different ways. Yet gender frequently finds a way to pass as invisible when addressing 'the masculine'. This is the result of a patriarchal strategy which Allan G. Johnson has called "male identification", through which in patriarchal societies "core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are culturally associated with how we think about men, manhood, and masculinity" (2014: 7). This illustrates how masculinity has stressed and implemented a centrality and universality of its own which have reinforced the character of masculinity as culturally superior. Nonetheless, efforts launched by feminisms to critically appraise societal norms in terms of gender have laid bare, among other things, this male privilege of superordination. Stephen M. Whitehead has developed this idea in the following terms: "Not surprisingly it has been feminists who have alerted men to the transparent 'obliviousness' in their 'gendered attitudes, prejudices and motivations'" (2001: 356). Sally Robinson, for her part, offers a much clearer and direct statement to reinforce the very same idea: "Any discussion of masculinity that begins from the premise that men enjoy unearned privileges in society or that male subjectivity emerges from a position of dominance, is a discussion of masculinity constructed by feminism" (2002: 147). The author further remarks how "[f]eminist thinking has created this masculinity that we now study, deconstruct and work to reconstruct, and *this* masculinity is anything but invisible" (Robinson 2002: 148, emphasis in original). It is clear that through feminist interrogation it becomes possible to render masculinity visible and see how it operates.

The discipline of critical men's studies as an academic field offers helpful frameworks to approach these issues. R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt affirm that "[m]asculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals [but rather] configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action" (2005: 836), thus confirming that gender is performative and that masculinity is also constructed. As stated above, some feminist scholars consider that "[t]he oppositional use of women in the construction of masculinity is so widespread that it has become transparent" (Collins 2006: 82), a fact that brings to the forefront the utmost importance in studying masculinities critically, in problematising this transparency. For that reason, Harry Brod (2002) highlights the urgency of analysing men as gendered beings in order to expose this contradictory invisibility of the masculine. Following these ideas, defending that men have been situated as superior and dominant requires acknowledging that men exist *as men* for the rest. My claim here is that their ontological position is relational, because it does entail a hierarchy and a difference towards others, even when one is unaware of it or when their privilege seems invisible, as previously discussed.

Relationality thus emerges as a pillar for this case study due to the fact that only through reciprocity and comparison can men come to exist *as men*. If identities are discursively constructed —shaped through both language and socialisation— it must be recognised that others play a crucial role in the formation of our identities, including the process of becoming men, women or non-binary individuals. For example, theoretical models of relational ontologies "challenge claims to essence and substance emphasizing interdependence, fluidity, and emergence in the context of an ever-changing relational world" (Spyrou 2022) and can be used here to see men as dynamic entities that cannot be essentialised, not as "thing-sin-themselves or things-behind-phenomena" but as "things-in-phenomena" (Barad 2009: 140). Gender, long understood as relational (Brod 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt

2005), operates within this framework, and masculinity, in particular, emerges as a practice of power that creates a category within the gender hierarchy (Bourdieu 2001; Robinson 2002). Precisely, this interdependence renders it imperative to scrutinise traditional gender categories jointly. Brod illustrates the significance of this point clearly: "it is a theoretical mistake to think that one can analyze women's lives and men's lives separately […] [since this] misses precisely the core of the reality of gender, that gender is a socially constructed category formed precisely in and through the interplay of genders" (2002: 165). Consequently, in my study of masculinity in the novel *Behold the Dreamers*, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive analysis of the power dynamics and interactions between Jende Jonga and his wife Neni.

Just as it does for these characters, the interplay of genders constructs and reinforces hierarchies that shape the lives of individuals. As Johnson puts it, both patriarchy and people's experiences "exist *through* the other, and neither exists without the other" (2014: 41, emphasis in original). Through the repetition of performative as well as symbolic acts, the gender system is created and the attribution of gender is achieved. But since this idea of gender is a socially produced reality, it can be undone or reconfigured. For that reason, many men become concerned with preserving their status and privileges. As a result, there exists a form of "permanent tension and contention […] imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances" (Bourdieu 2001: 50), confirming the never-ending necessity of reassuring masculinity by means of behaviour and social interaction. From a feminist perspective, we are confronted with a striking contradiction: to be a man is supposedly unmarked, but only insofar as one succeeds in embodying an idealised form of masculinity. And men's attempts to achieve hegemonic masculinity, "the culturally exalted form of masculinity" (Carrigan et al. 1985: 592), is certainly noticeable. Being a man implies *growing into a man*, by "learning the social expectations and cultural ideas of what a man is" (Mutua 2006a: 14), and finally *becoming a man* in the eyes of others. The relevance of these theoretical premises is best illustrated through the character of Jende Jonga, who exemplifies many of the dynamics outlined here, as his sense of masculinity is learned, not natural, and above all interactive, grounded in a clearly intersubjective dimension.

Another particularly important consideration is that Jende's masculinity is shaped by context and prone to continual transformation. As Connell and Messerschmidt remind us, masculinities must be seen as cultural constructs that "can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (2005: 836). For the protagonist in *Behold the Dreamers*, as will be demonstrated throughout the article, the struggle to assert his masculinity involves adapting, within his migratory context, to an ideal of the respectable African man living in the West

—one who, in his new life, achieves both economic stability and a solid family structure. In her novel, Imbolo Mbue introduces a working-class father figure who sees his own sense of identity "affected by movement and migration" (Hartung et al. 2024a: 14), and since conceptions of hegemonic masculinity also depend on geographical region, historical period and its respective values and norms as well as socio-economic context (Bühring 2024: 192), it seems necessary to emphasise how Jende (re)constructs his masculine self in relation to his new surroundings. As an African migrant in the United States, he is expected to succeed outside the home while remaining a pillar within it. Shaped both by white middle-class norms and his own cultural expectations, these competing pressures reveal how fragile his family leadership is and how his vulnerability manifests in controlling behaviour.

3. Black African Migrant Masculinity: Navigating Intersectionality and Respectability

When interrogating markers of identity, it seems important to discuss extensively a variety of social phenomena and personal experiences which simultaneously affect the formation of subjectivities. Since "one cannot isolate a dimension such as gender from other dimensions such as race, class, sexual orientation, etc., without oversimplifying and perhaps even falsifying what one is attempting to analyze" (Brod 2002: 164), paying attention to intersecting forms of identity and experience is crucial when approaching a text, as this helps resist reductive interpretations. In this way, the exploration of the text proposed in this article will take into account some of the multifaceted aspects of identity, which, just like masculinity, are "socially structured and individually embodied" (Kaufman in Mutua 2006a: 16). And to that end, special attention will be given to the African migrant male character in the novel by Imbolo Mbue through an analytical framework that accounts for the fragmentation of his identity. By including intersectionality[1] in the analysis of masculinity, this discussion interrogates several crucial problems at once in the exploration of dynamic, complex identities with the purpose of evaluating how race, class, sexuality, geographical origin, legal status and other circumstances can engage with the formation of masculinity.

One of the first aspects that must be stressed when analysing men in African migration novels is, without a doubt, race and how race specifically affects masculinity. Racial status is not immune to the issues of relationality expressed in the previous section, given that "[t]he Negro is comparison" (Fanon 1986: 211), for "he must be black in relation to the white man" (110), which causes a process of othering that subsequently ranks Black men as inferior, as subordinate:

"The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly" (113). Put more simply, "the black is not a man" (10) and cannot enjoy many of the privileges created by patriarchal systems. Indeed, for Collins, "[t]he fact of blackness excludes black men from participating in hegemonic masculinity because, if they do so, they decenter the assumed whiteness of those installed in the center of the definition itself" (2006: 74-75). Taking this idea further, it is possible to see how Black men are often particularly disadvantaged, for instance in the fields of education, employment, health and criminal justice (see Reeves et al. 2020) and, as Collins once again contends, they "have never been allowed to achieve the ideal of the real man of white middle-class masculinity yet have been evaluated using these criteria" (2006: 74), which means that Black men must endure certain helplessness regarding their gendered position.

Similarly, Black men's class status is usually defined and constricted by race. This means that poor Black men "have less access to economic, social, and institutional resources and opportunities and are also subject to a range of disempowering and distorted stereotypes against which they must operate" (Mutua 2006a: 16). The possibility of asserting their manhood is then very limited, exposing the unbridgeable gap between them and the ideal selves, a reminder of their 'failed' masculinity. Moreover, in this context of impotence where poor Black men lack agency, anger grows into a response that tolerates the use of violence as a desperate but plausible strategy to hold authority over others. bell hooks comments on the menace posed by what she has called "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and its construction of masculinity as "life-threatening", for it is based on "sexist notions of masculinity [which] legitimize the use of violence to maintain control" (2015: 77). This evidences a clear connection between forms of bodily harm and Black heterosexual masculinities, especially in the American collective consciousness, discursively related to instances of the endangerment of physical integrity, such as Black-on-Black homicide, domestic violence and rape.

This degradation is more pronounced for poor Black men who have migrated from Africa, as their racialisation intersects with their construction as transnational, dehumanised others. Broadly speaking, recent migrants from Africa are often seen in the West as abject inasmuch as they do not "respect borders, positions, rules" thus "disturbing identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982: 4).[2] These Africans in diaspora thus become menacing, destabilising forces that, as immigrants, are "conceived as a disruption, an interruption to the idea of [...] a particular nation" (Fortier 2012: 31-32). For this reason, through xenophobia and racism, the discourses around this phenomenon of global mobility portray immigrants as troublesome and even dangerous, complicating their Blackness by means of renewed forms of national and cultural 'othering'.

Not only that, Black migrant masculinity is also liminal insofar as it must be renegotiated in relation to the new sociocultural context present in the Western globalised countries where they settle. That is why Dominic Pasura and Anastasia Christou, in their article "Theorizing Black (African) Transnational Masculinities", state that "[t]he premigration gendered and social hierarchies are being challenged and contested in the hostland, as diasporic conditions force the majority of African men to rethink their masculine identities within diaspora households and society" (2018: 530). As part of a "global gender order" in which gender practices can be "specific or local, but carry the impress of the broader forces that make a global society" (Connell 2009: 128), different approaches to masculinity interact, blend and clash. This conceptual re-orientation requires recognising that African masculinities do not escape from merging local and global gender discourses and that only through the examination of how migrants can navigate both dominant discourses and their own cultural narratives can the intersectional tensions of Black men's experiences in diaspora be fully understood.

African masculinities, as diverse as they may be, are all "constructed under the influence of a patriarchal ideology that places men above women" (Pasura and Christou 2018: 527), and although it may be true that "definitions of African masculinities are not uniform and monolithic, not generalizable to all men in Africa" (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005: 8), it is possible to see them following well-extended practices of heterosexual masculinity. For example, most contemporary notions of the ideal masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa are based on achieving a level of financial independence, employment or income that allow men to start a family (Pasura and Christou 2018: 527). In the case of male economic migrants more specifically, their status as head of the family is validated by their earning potential and ability to retain what Pasura and Christou call "respectability". This idea of respectability, they argue, "refers to migrant men's desires and efforts to claim positive recognition in contexts structured by 'otherness' and a neoliberal economy" (523). The most relevant aspect of this conceptualisation is that it aligns with the values of neoliberal societies and pushes men to adopt certain attitudes, such as being a provider for one's family and the accumulation of material possessions (523), reinforcing a model for African economic migrants which is analogous (to a certain extent) to the ideal middle-class white man of the global gender order. In brief, despite being "on the periphery of globalisation, Africans do not live in isolation and are influenced by global trends and cultural practices" (Mungai and Pease 2009: 100), thus revealing that the paradigm for men in diaspora revolves around their transnational experience at the same time that it aligns with a global conventional wisdom of masculinities.

However, there is a clearly moralistic component, perhaps more common to Black African diasporic communities than to other groups, that shapes the understanding of respectable men as decent, with an emphasis on safeguarding propriety. Thus, respectability for African men "is not simply a measure of one's economic and/or social capital but also of morality and proper norms of gendered behavior" (Pasura and Christou 2018: 532), and it becomes, in this way, something inherent to African traditional core values that has to be "appropriated, negotiated, and performed" (Pasura and Christou 2018: 523) in the diaspora space. Not only does it shape their everyday individual and communal transnational lives; it also serves as the distinctive feature of their assimilation into appropriate models of diasporic masculinities.

Consequently, a central aspect of the reconfiguration of their masculinity lies in securing recognition and positive validation for their performance across various domains of life —such as fatherhood, household leadership, education, employment, property ownership as well as citizenship or permanent residence in a Western country. This pursuit of respectability is linked with intersectionality and needs to be considered when exploring how men navigate and redefine their gender roles within transnational settings.

4. Re-gendering African Migration Novels: An Exploration of Masculinities in *Behold the Dreamers* (2016)

Behold the Dreamers (2016) tells a story of intertwined lives in the 2008 financial crisis in New York, where Cameroonian immigrants Jende and Neni Jonga start working for the wealthy Edwards family. The African couple and their son, Liomi, currently residing in Harlem, have only recently reunited in the United States, where Jende has worked three jobs and saved for two years until he could afford their visas and plane tickets. Newly hired as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, an investment banker at Lehman Brothers, Jende feels he is finally providing for his family, and he even manages to get Neni hired by Cindy Edwards for housekeeping and childcare over the summer. The family believe they are now in a better position to pursue job stability, higher education and financial security —starting anew in the land of opportunity— but their dreams do not last for long. Like other Afropolitan[3] literary explorations, Imbolo Mbue's novel addresses the hardships and precariousness of immigration and contributes to dismantling, to a certain extent, the rhetoric of the American Dream. Such an objective is achieved not only by revealing the class divides, tough migration policies and gendered vulnerabilities that affect the characters personally, but also by pointing towards a greater scheme of Black empowerment that ended up failing, disproportionately emphasised during Barack Obama's presidency.

The novel, through a personified setting of neoliberalism (Braga 2020: 49), offers a critique of idealised contemporary society attuned to Obama's resurrection of the American Dream (Masterson 2020: 3). On the one hand, the story shows the human component of Black African migrant families, "unable to achieve upward social mobility in the United States" (Wacker 2021: 237) but who naïvely "rejoice in the consumerism of America" (Onuzo 2017). On the other hand, it offers a critical perspective on white educated upper-class social circles who, despite running a "predatory capitalist world" (Nfah-Abbenyi 2024: 368), do not succeed in living "a contented life" (Onuzo 2017). In recent years, Mbue's text has received critical attention for challenging discourses of neoliberalism and exposing the chimeras that shape some migrants' hopes about life abroad (Braga 2020; Masterson 2020; Toohey 2020; Wacker 2021) as well as for its discussion of precarious diasporic mobilities (Sousa 2020; Odey 2022; Ngeh and Nalova 2023). However, I contend that most of them have not focused enough on its representation of gender identities and roles. Some have included in their analysis a deep insight into the interlocking oppressions of gender, class and race only for the character of Neni (such as Irele 2021; Costantini 2024), but few have made comments pointing towards Jende's gendered behaviour as an accompaniment to the discussion of other topics (Suárez-Rodríguez 2023; Nfah-Abbenyi 2024). Since previous studies have failed to comprehensively address the issue of masculinity and most have certainly not taken into account the experiences lived by Jende in relation to this academic discipline, the aim of this section is then to inspect this character using the proposed theoretical framework of relational masculinities and the notion of respectability.

My view is that Jende's gendered position needs to be assessed as relational and requires an analysis of how his subjectivity depends on the power relations he establishes with others. For instance, in the opening pages of the novel, Jende "feels complete as he is on the verge of becoming a better man" (Ngeh and Nalova 2023: 130), since his hard work in the United States as a taxi driver in the Bronx and dishwasher in a Manhattan restaurant has finally allowed him to pay the bride-price for Neni. Jende is at last showing Neni the respect she is due and finally receives her family's permission to marry her: "I had to show I am a real man, sir. Not take her for free as if she is... as if she is something I picked on the street" (Mbue 2016: 43). This ritualistic ceremony of the traditional Cameroonian arrangements before marriage resonates with "the tendency of African societies to commodify women as 'fetish-objects' exchanged between men to strengthen homosocial bonds" (Irigaray in Costantini 2024: 140), forcing Jende to perform a stereotypical version of masculinity that is created in relation to his wife, his wife's family and the rest of their community. By proving his economic might and attention to custom, Jende moves towards respectability for the first time in his life.

It is crucial for my analysis to view as well his involvement in his wife's life, both before and during the migratory process, as the new diasporic space that they inhabit allows for a reconfiguration of gender practices. In some measure, this entails a questioning of previous hierarchies, just like Winston, his cousin, underscores when speaking of the different marital dynamics in America: "The kinds of marriage people have in this country, Bo, very strange. It's not like back home where a man can do as he sees fit and a woman follows him. Over here it's reversed. Women tell their men what they want and the men do it, because they say happy wife, happy life. This society is funny" (Mbue 2016: 199). Throughout the novel, Neni seems to reject that traditional conception imposed on African wives. She is presented as somebody resourceful enough to overcome all kinds of adversities on her own and determined to obtain a certain degree of agency, fighting against her secondary role in their marriage. Indeed, as Augusta Atinuke Irele argues, "Neni occupies a particularly gendered vulnerable position" (2021: 15) as a character who "finds herself in a migrant purgatory, trapped between the goals she longs to realize and the baggage of the society she left behind" (18). When the Jongas receive the news that Jende's asylum application has not been approved, she feels like a puppet, as if her whole life had always been shaped by others' decisions: "This helplessness crushed her, the fact that she had traveled to America only to be reminded of how powerless she was, how unfair life could be" (Mbue 2016: 63). She was about to be drawn into her husband's deportation process, thereby being expected to leave the country as well, without the opportunity to respond on her own terms, without choosing what she thinks would be best for her.

If her life is to be analysed closely, it is possible to reach the conclusion that, as a result of patriarchal dynamics, she is continuously subjugated to men: first to her father and now to her husband. She has even been read as "a woman dependent on a man who is himself financially disempowered" (Nkealah 2020: 204), emphasising not only their lack of agency as poor immigrants but also how power relations work within their marriage. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi makes a very interesting remark related to this when she notes that "Jende takes advantage of Neni's pregnancy to forbid his wife from enrolling in spring and summer courses" (2024: 369) because he wants her to stay in the home, even though her status a registered student protects her from deportation: "'I want my wife to stay at home with my new child for some time' […] there was nothing she could do. He had brought her to America. He paid her tuition. He was her protector and advocate. He made decisions for the family" (Mbue 2016: 171-172). Despite the fact that Jende now attends to everything, and treats her "like a queen", Neni has no choice but to "defer to his wisdom" and accept "the privilege of being married to an overly protective man" (Mbue 2016: 173). As the story unfolds and the couple start realising their limitations in the host country, their attitudes and views begin to diverge more and more. Cláudio Braga comments how "Neni as a character stands in opposition to Jende, which highlights the immigrant dilemma of believing or not believing in the dream, giving up or trying, and testing the limits of self-sacrifice and the meaning of perseverance" (2020: 47). This happens because Neni holds onto the dream, even considering the possibility of divorce and sham marriage, as the United States represents for her "a utopic space in which she can enjoy experiences that are inconceivable in Cameroon" (Irele 2021: 15): "Until the day she left the country, she was going to keep believing that she and her family had a chance" (Mbue 2016: 68). Moreover, Neni reproaches Jende for caring more about appearances than about looking for actual solutions to their problems: "I don't think you will fight till the end for us to remain here. I think when the time comes, you'll give up, because you care too much about your pride. But I'll do whatever I need to do for us to stay in America!" (230). Once it is revealed that she has discussed their immigration woes with a female pastor who has offered help, Jende loses his temper and attacks his wife verbally for being imprudent: "The man who had promised to always take care of her was standing above her vomiting a parade of insults, spewing out venom she never thought he had inside him. For the first time in a long love affair, she was afraid he would beat her. She was almost certain he would beat her" (237).

Jende's resentment is born out of his wife's flouting of gender roles, which reminds him of his failure as a husband and father in their new context. Jende eventually resorts to physical violence to correct her alleged stubbornness and improper behaviour when she keeps proposing alternative solutions; but she does not give in easily, as the next excerpt portrays: "She didn't see the slap coming […] 'Did you just hit me?' […] 'Then hit me again! […] Go ahead and hit me, Jende... I'm begging you, hit me again!' […] 'Oh, no, please hit me', she said. 'Raise your hand and hit me again! America has beaten you and you don't know what to do and now you think hitting me will make it better. Please go ahead and hit —' So he did" (Mbue 2016: 333-334). Mbue here, by means of her character's words, combines on a symbolic level the systemic violence Jende has been confronting with an incident of gender-based violence. Nonetheless, my intention is not to justify this behaviour by focusing on the discrimination and suffering he is living. Many previous studies have avoided reading into the issue of gender-based violence in the novel, since only Toohey (2020) makes a reference to it, and although she does not rationalise or excuse his behaviour, she does place this incident within other forms of violence and pain. Although this is true, I argue that it is important not to contextualise his abusive character only as part of a spiral of multiform violence; rather, it should be viewed as a mechanism deliberately used in the construction of traditional masculinity within their diasporic household and as a tool used for the correction of gender transgressions.

Beyond the domestic sphere, Jende also strives to claim a dignified position and to affirm his value as a man, despite the constraints of his social, racial and educational status. Mbue portrays him as deeply involved in the Edwards family's private lives, seeking to position himself as a male peer and even a friend to the men and boys of the household. When Jende learns of Clark Edwards's encounters with prostitutes, he pretends not to be fully aware of what is happening and his silence is interpreted as connivance: "Jende drove him wherever he needed to be next and asked no questions […] and agreed with whatever the boss said, as if to say, it's okay, sir, it's perfectly all right, sir, what you're doing. And he could tell Clark felt that way around him; that Clark trusted him and knew that no one would ever know" (Mbue 2016: 187). Although it seems that he is accommodating to the circumstances willingly, Jende actually represents weakness and subjection, being more of a servant to than an ally of what Clark Edwards stands for: transnational business masculinity.[4] Contrary to what Neni will do with Cindy later on in the novel, he respects the confidentiality agreement he has signed and is incapable of taking advantage of his role of secret-keeper. In point of fact, far from confronting his boss, he lies by omission to Mrs. Edwards to cover up for Mr. Edwards and eventually agrees to deceive her by falsifying his account of Mr. Edwards's daily activities. Nfah-Abbenyi has interpreted his loyalty as a form of aligning with "manhood and (toxic) masculinity" (2024: 371) through which Jende conducts "a defence of power and manhood that runs counter to his (financial) interests and wellbeing" (372), playing the role of an obedient and cowardly man unable to defy stronger masculine figures. Nevertheless, on other occasions Jende proves to be capable of affection and tenderness toward Mr. Edwards's sons, since he listens to their problems and gives them advice and emotional support. Their special connection arguably "challenge[s] the rigidity of social hierarchies revealing the existence of marginal spaces of interethnic and cross-class encounter" (Costantini 2024: 137, n. 5).

Furthermore, in his struggle to conform to an ideal of respectability —the only model of true success for a Black African man in the diaspora— Jende Jonga embodies the liminal position of the economic migrant who is "a small man at work" but "a big man at home" (Onuzo 2017). First, he acknowledges the model of respectability on display in neoliberal Western societies when discussing his main motivations for migrating with his boss: "I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man" (Mbue 2016: 39). His interest in patrilineal genealogy shows his conception of identity in a male-oriented world endowed with a sense of respect for vicarious success, where fathers can have the chance to redeem themselves if they see their life expectations met by their sons. Moreover, as stated above, he also sees his family as the perfect environment for claiming back control. As Nfah-Abbenyi notes, "Clark dominates and governs his daily life and he finds ways to dominate Neni's and Liomi's" (2024: 370), thus replicating forms of subjugation and control that he is encountering in his job. Later in the novel, once Jende gets used to the corporate lifestyle, he tries to make use of small strategies that could help him achieve a temporary sense of reputability in other public spheres. For instance, he sees masculine business attire as a tool to obtain fleeting respectability and reaffirm his position: "Owning the briefcase and carrying it every day to work —that was one of his greatest career prides. It made him feel accomplished, like he was a sort of big man himself, not just a little man driving a big man around" (Mbue 2016: 248). This is especially relevant when performing masculinity in front of other men: "With his own briefcase, he'd become a white-collar professional, too […]. On the downtown subway, dressed in his suit and clip-on tie, he held it firmly, looking no different from the accountants and engineers and financial advisors sitting next to him" (248-249). This moment of self-regard actually precedes the moment in which he is dismissed as an employee for the Edwardses. Such antithetical events put together in the narrative line enable an understanding of the inefficacy of pretence in hiding his failure to fit the ideal of respectable men. Therefore, his ability to take care of his family is clearly put in jeopardy once more. At this point, Jende must make certain decisions that will affect the future of his family: he could either remain in the country illegally, perhaps becoming a burden for them, or take his family back home. Other African men around him offer him different advice regarding this issue. From one perspective, Jende is reminded by his immigration lawyer Bubakar, "a fast-talking Nigerian" (19), that despite all hardships he must "[p]ersevere it like a man" (321). This character not only "contributes to maintaining Jende's belief in the American Dream" (Suárez-Rodríguez 2023: 88), but also reenacts the discursive style of Black African transnational masculinities in terms of work ethic and persistence. Winston, in turn, is aware of the barriers Jende would have to face as an uneducated Black African man if he decides to stay in the country. Jende's cousin believes that Jende "might never be able to make enough money to afford to live the way he'd like to live […] to own a home or pay for his wife and children to go to college […] to have a really good sleep at night" (Mbue 2016: 322), even if he eventually were to get his papers, pointing towards the impossibility for Jende to achieve the dream shared by so many immigrants.

His American Dream is doomed from the beginning, as far as the events in the novel are concerned. From the opening chapter, readers learn that Black African migrants' opportunities are limited, even if the Jongas seem to overlook this, which raises doubt as to whether the family will succeed. In fact, halfway through the plot, it becomes evident that Jende "has already endured enough physical and emotional suffering and made up his mind to return home rather than engage in an endless string of uncertain legal appeals" (Toohey 2020: 396). He decides to place all his ambition in the new projects that lie ahead of them back in Limbe: "he would be returning home with close to 10 million CFA francs, enough to restart their life in a beautiful rental with a garage for his car and a maid so his wife could feel like a queen. He would have enough to start a business […] and send Liomi to […] boarding school" (Mbue 2016: 352). But in so doing Jende fails to realise that, for the couple, "a return to their homeland means different things" (Toohey 2020: 398), since he only sees another chance at becoming a respectable head of the family and dismisses Neni's torment over abandoning the many professional and personal paths that could have been opened for her in the United States. All in all, Jende opts to return, in a desperate attempt to regain a position of leadership that would allow him to provide for his family while impressing others in his hometown. This decision manifests a complex, sometimes contradictory, identity as a man, someone who adapts his masculinity to the different situations and people around him.

5. Conclusion

This article has exposed the construction of masculine identity in the character Jende Jonga in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* by means of both relationality and respectability. The study of this novel through the lens of masculinity has stressed the importance of depicting gender in relational terms, as something performed in almost every action, dependent on social context and embedded in intersubjectivity. Similarly, it has been discussed how respectability represents one of the foundations of Black African migrant manhood, since gender norms for African diasporic communities rely on profound veneration for masculine figures and conform in some degree to a model of masculinity only achieved through perseverance and enormous effort.

The analysis proposed in this paper takes into account not only that Jende's sense of masculinity has been overlooked by previous discussions of the novel, but also that his gendered position is renegotiated within the text by the migratory process. Jende is in a constant battle to earn recognition both in the US and Cameroon and, as the novel progresses, he experiences the consequences of the emotional and psychological exhaustion caused by his failed assimilation. His shame and disillusionment are overshadowed by his wife's aspirations, led by her outstanding energy, which comes to occupy a central position within the household. Jende needs to fulfil his role of breadwinner for his family in order to validate himself as a true man, using violence if needed to overcome insubordination or resistance to his power. Nonetheless, this character is far from powerful, as he is truly vulnerable, with his own autonomy significantly limited by socio-economic constraints, yielding to the authority of his employer and succumbing symbolically to white neoliberal upper-class manhood.

The present study underscores the need to reassess gender narratives within migrant literature, to interrogate the constructions, performances and tensions of masculinity in diasporic contexts. It also expands the scope of research on African diasporic fiction by encouraging the integration of theoretical insights from critical men's studies. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the literary analysis but also enables a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, particularly those shaping male subjectivities within transnational and postcolonial contexts, thereby opening a productive line of investigation for future scholarly work.

Acknowledgements

The present research has been supported by Grant PREP2022-001061, as part of the Research Project "Communitas/Immunitas: Relational Ontologies in Atlantic Anglophone Cultures of the 21st Century" (PID2022-136904NB-100), funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ESF+.

Notes

1. Intersectionality is conceived here as "a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender [together with other markers of identity] as exclusive or separable" (Crenshaw 1991: 1244, n. 9).

2. The characters of Neni and Jende Jonga have been read as "abject cosmopolitans", belonging to a world of exclusion, referred to as deportspora (Nyers in Suárez-Rodríguez 2023: 182).

3. This term refers to being African and cosmopolitan at the same time. It describes a modern, globally connected African identity that blends African cultural roots with world-spanning social practices and transnational lifestyles. The coinage of the word is associated, not without controversy, to both Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi.

4. For a thorough discussion of the concept, see Connell (1998) and (2005).

Works Cited

Barad, Karen. 2009. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Duke U.P.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Trans. R. Nice. Polity Press.

Braga, Cláudio Roberto Vieira. 2020. "Neoliberalism in *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue: The Latest Menace to the American Dream". In Gonçalves, Gláucia Renate and José de Paiva dos Santos (eds.) *Prospero and Caliban Revisited: Brazilian Critical Perspectives on World Literature in English*. Faculdade de Letras da UFMG: 35-54.

Brod, Harry. 2002. "Studying Masculinities as Superordinate Studies". In Gardiner, Judith Kegan (ed.) *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*. Columbia U.P.: 161-175.

Bühring, Lisa-Nike. 2024. "Man Plants, Woman Nurtures: Reflections of Older German Men". In Hartung, Heike, Roberta Maierhofer and Christian Schmitt-Kilbet (eds.): 191-209. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839469064>.

Carrigan Tim, Bob Connell and John Lee. 1985. "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity". *Theory and Society* 14 (5): 551-604. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657315>.

Charsley, Katharine and Helena Wray. 2015. "Introduction: The Invisible (Migrant) Man". *Men and Masculinities* 18 (4): 403-423.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2006. "A Telling Difference: Dominance, Strength, and Black Masculinities". In Mutua, Athena D. (ed.) *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Routledge: 73-97.

Connell, Raewyn W. 1998. "Masculinities and Globalization". *Men and Masculinities* 1 (1): 3-23.

Connell, Raewyn W. (1995) 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd Edition. University of California Press.

Connell, Raewyn W. (2002) 2009. *Gender: In World Perspective*. 2nd Edition. Polity Press.

Connell, Raewyn W. and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept". *Gender & Society: Official Publication of Sociologists for Women in Society* 19 (6): 829-859.

Costantini, Mariaconcetta. 2024. "Mobility, Belonging and the Utopia of a Borderless World: A Spatial and Identitarian Reading of Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". In Capancioni, Claudia, Mariaconcetta Costantini and Mara Mattoscio (eds.) *Rethinking Identities Across Boundaries: Genders/Genres/Genera*. Springer International Publishing: 125-144.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.

Donaldson, Mike, Raymond Hibbins, Richard Howson and Bob Pease. (eds.) 2009. *Migrant Men: Critical Studies of Masculinities and the Migration Experience*. Routledge.

Fanon, Frantz. 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C.L. Markham. Pluto Press.

Fortier, Anne-Marie. 2012. "The Migration Imaginary and the Politics of Personhood". In Messer, Michi, Renee Schroeder and Ruth Wodak (eds.) *Migrations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Springer: 31-41.

Gardiner, Judith Kegan. 2002. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*. Columbia U.P.

Hartung, Heike, Roberta Maierhofer and Christian Schmitt-Kilbet. 2024a. "Introduction: Masculinities Ageing Between Cultures. Bringing Relationality, Kinship and Care into Dialogue". In *Masculinities Ageing between Cultures: Relationality, Kinship and Care in Dialogue*: 9-23.

Hartung, Heike, Roberta Maierhofer and Christian Schmitt-Kilbet. (eds.) 2024b. *Masculinities Ageing between Cultures: Relationality, Kinship and Care in Dialogue*. Transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839469064>.

Hibbins, Raymond and Bob Pease. 2009. "Men and Masculinities on the Move". In Donaldson, Mike, Raymond Hibbins, Richard Howson and Bob Pease (eds.): 1-19.

hooks, bell. 2015. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Routledge.

Irele, Augusta Atinuke. 2021. "Dystopic Dissonance: Migration and Alienation in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". In Rose, Kate (ed.) *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration, and Trauma*. Routledge: 7-21.

Johnson, Allan. (1997) 2014. *Gender Knot*. 3rd Edition. Temple U.P.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L.S. Roudiez. Columbia U.P.

Masterson, John. 2020. "Bye-Bye Barack: Dislocating Afropolitanism, Spectral Marxism and Dialectical Disillusionment in Two Obama-Era Novels". *African Identities* 18 (1-2): 18-40.

Mbue, Imbolo. 2016. *Behold the Dreamers*. Random House.

Morrell, Robert and Lahoucine Ouzgane. 2005. "African Masculinities: An Introduction". In *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan: 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403979605>.

Mungai, Ndungi wa and Bob Pease. 2009. "Rethinking Masculinities in the African Diaspora". In Donaldson, Mike, Raymond Hibbins, Richard Howson and Bob Pease (eds.): 96-114.

Mutua, Athena D. 2006a. "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities". In *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Routledge: 1-42.

Mutua, Athena D. 2006b. *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Routledge.

Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. 2024. "Cruel Optimism: The Longings of Outsiders within Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". In Losambe, Lokangaka and Tanure Ojaide (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of the New African Diasporic Literature*. Routledge: 366-377.

Ngeh, Andrew Tata and Sarah Mongoh Nalova. 2023. "Cross Cultural Encounters and Diasporic Sullenness: A Study of Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*". *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth* 6 (2): 124-136.

Nkealah, Naomi. 2020. "Challenging Precarious Work in Anglophone Cameroonian Women's Literature: A Feminist Analysis of Anne Tanyi-Tang's *Visiting America* and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". *Current Writing* 32 (2): 198-207.

Odey, Okache C. 2022. "Migration and the Notion of Return in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". *Tasambo Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture* 1 (1): 66-74.

Onuzo, Chibundu. 2017. "*Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue Review — an Impressive Debut". *The Guardian* (August 4). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/04/behold-the-dreamers-imbolo-mbue-review>. Accessed November 21, 2024.

Pasura, Dominic and Anastasia Christou. 2018. "Theorizing Black (African) Transnational Masculinities". *Men and Masculinities* 21 (4): 521-546.

Reeves, Richard V., Sarah Nzau, and Ember Smith. 2020. "The Challenges Facing Black Men — and the Case for Action". *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-challenges-facing-black-men-and-the-case-for-action/>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

Robinson, Sally. 2002. "Pedagogy of the Opaque: Teaching Masculinity Studies". In Gardiner, Judith Kegan (ed.) *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*. Columbia U.P.: 141-160.

Sousa, Sandra. 2020. "'A Man Can Find a Home Anywhere': African Mobility and the Fall of Dreams in *Behold the Dreamers*". *Mulemba* 12 (22): 78-92.

Spyrou, Spyros. 2022. '"Relational Ontologies"'. *Oxford Bibliographies*. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791231/obo-9780199791231-0260.xml>. Accessed November 13, 2024.

Suárez-Rodríguez, Ángela. 2023. *Emotional Transitions in Contemporary Afrodiasporic Women's Writing*. Routledge.

Toohey, Elizabeth. 2020. "9/11 and the Collapse of the American Dream: Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". *Studies in the Novel* 52 (4): 385-402.

Wacker, Julian. 2021. "'Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe': Precarity and (American) Dream Narratives in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*". In Schmidt-Haberkamp, Barbara, Marion Gymnich and Klaus P. Schneider (eds.) *Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World*. Brill: 234-245.

Whitehead, Stephen M. 2001. "Man: The Invisible Gendered Subject?". In Whitehead, Stephen M. and Frank J. Barrett (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader*. Polity Press: 351-368.

Received: 4/02/2025
Accepted: 4/03/2026

SEWING IDENTITIES: ROSALIE HAM'S *THE DRESSMAKER*

COSIENDO IDENTIDADES: *THE DRESSMAKER*

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202612038

ALEJANDRA MORENO-ÁLVAREZ
Universidad de Oviedo
morenoalejandra@uniovi.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2673-9025

Abstract

This article analyses Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* (2000) through performativity, postmemory and postcolonialism. The main character, Tilly Dunnage, returns to the fictional town of Dungatar in rural 1950s Australia to confront a traumatic past and take care of her mother. In doing so, she uses fashion as a means of shaping her identity, challenging the Australian outback status quo, and voicing her traumatic past. Her *haute couture* creations make the townspeople visible, but they do not mend the deep emotional wounds. Clothing in *The Dressmaker* serves both as material memory and as a theatrical element that reveals the instability of fixed identities. Ultimately, the article underlines that Tilly's destruction of the town represents both the failure of superficial transformation and the radical potential of (un)dressing as a feminist and postcolonial act.

Keywords: Australian literature, material culture, performativity, postcolonialism, postmemory.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza *The Dressmaker* (2000) de Rosalie Ham desde la performatividad, la posmemoria y el poscolonialismo. La protagonista, Tilly Dunnage, regresa al pueblo ficticio de Dungatar, en la Australia rural de los años 50, para enfrentarse a un pasado traumático y cuidar de su madre. En este proceso, emplea la moda como herramienta de construcción identitaria, resistencia y subversión. Sus diseños de alta costura no solo transforman la apariencia de la comunidad, sino que también dejan al descubierto las heridas emocionales que aún persisten. La moda en *The Dressmaker* funciona como memoria material y elemento teatral, dejando al descubierto la inestabilidad de las identidades estáticas. El artículo sostiene que la destrucción del pueblo por parte de Tilly simboliza la imposibilidad de una transformación basada en lo superficial y el potencial narrativo de (des)vestirse en el discurso feminista y postcolonial.

Palabras clave: cultura material, literatura australiana, performatividad, poscolonialismo, posmemoria.

1. Introduction

Rosalie Ham's novel *The Dressmaker* (2000) and its 2015 film adaptation, directed and co-written by Jocelyn Moorhouse, use fashion as a means of storytelling, remembering and identity-shaping. Set in the fictitious rural town of Dungatar, Australia, during the 1950s, the novel centres on Tilly Dunnage, a gifted seamstress who returns home after years of exile. Tilly left Dungatar due to a traumatic incident in her childhood, which led her to live and work in Melbourne, London, Spain, Milan and Paris, places where she developed her skills in *haute couture*.

The trauma that prompted Tilly's exile looms over her return to the town. As a child, she was cornered and assaulted at school by Stewart Pettyman, a local boy, who happened to be, as she will later discover, her stepbrother. In panic, Tilly dodges the boy as he runs towards her, prompting a fatal collision with a brick wall: "'He was running at me like a bull…' she said in a high-whistle voice and put her fingers either side of her ears to make horns', …like this" (Ham 2015: 193). The event, though accidental, marked her as a "murderess" (46) in the town's eyes, since Stewart broke his neck and died, and with his death she had to carry the burden of guilt: "it's guilt, and the evil inside me —I carry it around with me, in me, all the time. It's like a black thing —a weight…" (184).

Tilly's return three decades later disrupts Dungatar's social life. By using fashion, she transforms the appearances of the townspeople but also manages to expose their hypocrisies and secrets. Tilly's designs are admired by the villagers and also make visual, as if we readers were on a catwalk, her emotional journey, particularly her reconciliation with her mother, Molly, and the town's gradual coming to terms with its own moral failures.

Mother and daughter mend their bond, notably so when Tilly speaks of her suppressed grief over the death of her seven-month-old baby, Pablo. It is then when Molly underlines how she, metaphorically, lost Tilly, her baby, too: "'I lost my little girl'" (231). The renewed relationship between the two characters exemplifies Andrea Llano Busta's views on trauma. According to the author, "overcoming trauma is reliant on the private sphere and the ability of family members to disregard the dominant ideology and show affection which, if verbal, may even counter official narratives" (2019: 47). In a similar vein, Molly confesses that Tilly is the daughter of Evan Pettyman and Tilly admits that she was abandoned by her partner following the death of their baby Pablo, since the father blamed her for the tragedy. This confession allows Tilly to let go of her guilt and to accept the compassion offered by those who truly care for her: the town's outcasts.

Mad Molly, murderess Tilly and eccentric Sergeant Horatio Farrat embody this sense of marginality and use clothing, whether by making or wearing it, to express their Otherness. One of the most revealing moments comes when Sergeant Horatio Farrat, dressed in a frock and leaning on Tilly, confesses, "'I don't care, Tilly', he said, 'I'm beyond caring what those people think or say anymore'" (Ham 2015: 241). Farrat's comment clearly establishes the dichotomy between the outcasts and the townspeople. Even Marigold Pettyman, Stewart's mother, finally acknowledges the truth behind the incident that led to Tilly's exile. Confronting her husband, she claims, "'You mean Tilly, your daughter, murdered *your son*?'" (258, emphasis in original) before exposing Stewart's abusive behaviour: "'Your son the bully. The fat, freckled, rude and smelly little boy who elbowed me when he passed, spied on me in the shower and assaulted little girls'" (258).

Fashion in *The Dressmaker* plays more than an aesthetic role, functioning as a language of its own. The garments Tilly creates are stitched with threads of shame (like Molly's), colonial memory (that which haunts the Australian outback) and unspoken desire (that of being free within a liminal space yet to be written and inhabited). Tilly's designs become acts of resistance, confession, healing and, ultimately, hope. In this context, clothing is not only something you wear, but a medium through which trauma and identity are both unveiled and transformed. I argue that *The Dressmaker* presents clothing as material memory, a means through which trauma can be voiced and redeemed. At the same time, Ham's use of theatre, embodied through costumes and masquerades, deconstructs notions of gender and belonging. Through the symbolic and performative uses of clothing, the novel illustrates how literature and fashion intertwine to disrupt postcolonial and patriarchal structures in mid-century Australia. Ham underlines the tensions between modernisation and traditionalism: the former embodied by Tilly, the latter by Dungatar's outback. Tilly's creative self-expression exposes and challenges Dungatar's moral repression. Fabric, both literally and metaphorically, becomes the means needed for resistance and transformation. Thus, the novel interrogates systems of political power and becomes part of postcolonial literature where aesthetics, memory and identity are stitched together as if the novel were an Australian quilt. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on performativity, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Frantz Fanon's reflections on clothing and colonial identity, this article explores how fashion in *The Dressmaker* functions as a material and theatrical language through which trauma, marginality and power are negotiated in mid-twentieth-century Australia.

2. Fashion as a Narrative Tool to Heal Trauma

Tilly Dunnage's story is stitched together through garments that reflect her transformation and inner trauma. Cast out as a child, she returns to Dungatar as a highly skilled and internationally trained dressmaker. The novel opens with Tilly arriving at Dungatar's train station. Her intention is to find refuge, to care for her sick mother, known as Mad Molly, and to confront the scars of her own unresolved trauma. Her creations, designs inspired by Balenciaga and Dior, contrast with the outdated and conservative clothing worn in rural Dungatar, which mirrors Dungatar's social norms and prejudices. This tension is shown in the following passage:

> Couples stood aside and stared at Tilly, draped in a striking green gown that was sculpted, crafted about her svelte frame. It curved her hips, stretched over her breasts and clung to her thighs. As the material —georgette, two-and-six a yard from the sale stand at Pratts. The girls in their short frocks with pinched waists, their hair stiff in neat circles, opened their pink lips wide and tugged self-consciously at their frothy skirts. (88)

Tilly's green gown and body merge as if to reveal that she has nothing to hide. In contrast, the people of Dungatar wear outdated frocks that veil not only their bodies but also the social identities they are incapable of performing.

The novel is structured into four parts named after the following fabrics: gingham, shantung, felt and brocade. Each one metaphorically reflects a narrative phase. Gingham, a chequered cotton used for testing patterns, symbolises the instability surrounding Tilly's return and the community's discomfort with her presence: "Beula stamped her feet. '…AND, that daughter of Mad Molly's is back —the murderess!'" (46). It also reflects how much of her identity, her bond with her mother and her role in the town remain fluid and undefined. When her neighbour, Irma Almanac, asks her why she came back, Tilly does not provide a solid answer but an ambiguous one: "'Tell me, why did a beautiful and clever girl like you come back here?' 'Why not?'" (78). This ambivalence is also seen when she explains to Teddy McSwiney, with whom she fell in love, "'They'll just have to get used to you'" (91) to which Tilly answers, "'No,' she said, 'I'll have to get used to them'" (91).

The second part of the novel is entitled "Shantung", after the luxurious silk often used for bridal gowns. This part of the narration coincides with Tilly's first public success and symbolises the fragile acceptance she begins to experience: "Their mouths dropped and their eyebrows rose as they pointed and whispered, *Think she's royalty*" (106 , emphasis in original), or like when "Gertrude Pratt came forward and stepped between Tilly and Barney" and asked, "'Did you make that dress?' […] Tilly turned to look at her and said cautiously, 'Yes. I'm a dressmaker'" (107). This being the reason why "[A] week before Christmas Tilly sat hunched over her sewing machine at the kitchen table, happy to be creating again" (113). The two fabrics clearly represent the pattern of trade routes that mirror Tilly's own journey and return.

The third part of *The Dressmaker* is entitled "Felt", which refers to a "nonwoven fabric made from short wool fibres" (189), traditionally used for skirts, bonnets and gloves. Felt is different from other fabrics because it is not made by weaving threads. Instead, it is made by pressing wool fibres together until they stick and form a thick, solid cloth, making it a versatile and useful material. Like felt, the events in this segment of the story are carefully chosen: memories, identities and social roles start to shift and change. We learn about Stewart Pettyman's death and the revelation that Tilly is Mr Pettyman's daughter. This is very relevant because, unfortunately, after Teddy's tragic death —caused by his fall into a silo— the townspeople of Dungatar turn against Tilly once more: "'She made him jump'. 'She murdered him'. 'She is cursed'. 'She gets it from her mother'" (201). Their accusations revive old prejudices, such as the townspeople's claim that Tilly killed Stewart Pettyman, and reinforce her outcast status. Soon after, a new seamstress, Una Pleasance, arrives in Dungatar to replace Tilly, relegating her once again to Otherness. This shift highlights the town's refusal to change and the impossibility of a new beginning for Tilly. Sergeant Farrat tries to cheer Tilly up by inviting her to take part in the fundraising festival organised by The Social Club. He asks her to alter his matador's costume, which symbolises Tilly herself, who as a child stepped aside from Stewart Pettyman, the "bull": "'I thought perhaps you could improvise some inserts, similar or at least blending with the general glitter of the costume. They could be disguised quite cleverly by Dungatar's only real creative hands, don't you think?'" (208). His gesture enhances Tilly's strength and transformative resilience to exist on her own terms.

A key moment in this part of the novel is the emergence of the idea of "a DRAMA eisteddfod" (227), a community performance awarding trophies for best actor, best actress, best play and best costumes. It is also in this fragment that Tilly, after finally reconciling with her mother, witnesses her death —a moment that symbolises the end of Tilly's ties to the past as if it were the end of an act, in this case, Act III. Tilly, when referring to theatre, underlines how "[P]lays are such fun to put on. They bring out the best and worst in people" (219). The third part of the novel thus becomes the final act of the life Tilly was forced to perform. Freed from the burden of guilt and memory, the reader is led into the final section of the novel, entitled Brocade, where the play, both literally and symbolically, takes place. Brocade, a fabric known for its ornate and theatrical qualities, marks the narrative climax, where identity, memory and revenge are draped in layers of symbolism and tragedy through the staging of the play, which I will discuss below. Both felt and brocade emerge as fabrics that symbolise Tilly's empowerment and her readiness for a new start.

The structural union between textile and text reinforces Ham's central message: narrative and identity do not follow a linear path; rather, they are intricately interwoven and mutually constitutive. The novel invites readers to interpret garments as stories made of fabric and shaped by memory, tension and contradiction. Aanchal Malhotra argues that fabrics become "material memory" (2017: 32) and can be as revealing as verbal history, since objects carry the imprint of lived experience. Every stitch Tilly sews carries layers of her own story and the story of Dungatar, as if she were a textile chronicler. Her designs become tools that hearken back to her past, reworking the identities and stories imposed on her. This reworking becomes a refashioning of history where both herstory (Tilly's) and theirstory (Dungatar's) intermingle.

Sergeant Farrat, Dungatar's cross-dressing policeman, also offers a parallel narrative. He secretly buys gingham to make himself a skirt —his queerness hidden in his love for fabric to which only Tilly and the reader bear witness. Sergeant coexists with Tilly in a space of Otherness that he can inhabit through fabric. In his hands, clothing becomes repression and revelation. His work as a maker of clothes is simultaneously underground and an outward tool of resistance against the town's rigid norms. Farrat's secret sewing mirrors Tilly's public designs, both revealing the hope for alternative identities to be sewn. Ham uses Farrat's and Tilly's duality to explore how memory, and particularly traumatic memory, is both hidden and inscribed on the body. Moreover, clothing acts as a mnemonic device for both characters and readers. A dress is never just a dress but a piece of clothing which contains loss, hope, tradition and transformation. For Tilly, who was exiled, abandoned and misjudged, each garment becomes a form of agency: a way to reclaim control. Her designs allow her to be part of the town's discourse and to claim her agency; she speaks through pleats, hems, linings and silhouettes. Fabric, in this sense, does not merely cover bodies —it reveals and transforms them. Fashion goes beyond absence and presence and offers a liminal space where affirmative interpretations can take hold.

3. Empowerment and Subversion Through Dress

Fashion empowers characters in *The Dressmaker* by disrupting the status quo. Gertrude, initially mocked as a "good mule" (15), turns radiant in a dress made by

Tilly. Her transformation earns her admiration and even shifts her social position, which means that Tilly's creations do more than beautify —they transform. The newly glamorous women of Dungatar become both admired and envied:

> The ladies from Winyerp and Itheca remained in their seats hiding their frothy frocks and net shawls. When Nancy visited the ladies' powder room, a woman in a stiff, strapless bird's-eye gown stood beside her at the mirror and asked, 'Who makes your enchanting gowns?' (181)

At the same time, Tilly's designs become tools of satire, exaggerating the characters' hypocrisies. When asked about the ball, Tilly exclaims, "'The gowns were wonderful'. She told herself she couldn't expect anything from this town. 'It was a wedding'" (122). Thus, clothing becomes a mirror that reflects the truth behind the social masks that each character wears. Tilly's designs are not just aesthetic decorations but means of narrative control, since through clothing she forces the townspeople to confront their own desires, ambitions and prejudices. Gertrude's bridal transformation, for example, is more than a stylistic triumph; it is a symbolic subversion of Dungatar's social hierarchies. Once ridiculed —"'You can't marry her, she's a heifer'" (109)— Gertrude becomes the object of the community's admiration:

> She looked lovely. Her dark chestnut locks were swept up in poised wave and held secure with a row of luscious pink roses, her eyes sparkling, velvet brown. Her neck looked slender and her skin peachy. She stood there in a fine silk taffeta gown, apricot pink, scoop necked —not too scooped— with sheer off-white tulle three-quarter-length sleeves. The bodice was wrapped firmly about her waist and gathered snugly around her hips, culminating in a large soft bow below her bottom, before falling to swing elegantly. (118)

Likewise, Prudence Dimm, the austere schoolteacher, is transformed into a figure of romantic charm, yet this change strengthens the deep repression and frustration that lie beneath her façade: "For Miss Prudence Dimm, Tilly had tailored royal blue wool crepe close to her body and inserted a sky blue silk double pleat down one side which kicked and shimmered when she moved" (179). Dungatar becomes a fashion show with the arrival of Tilly, proving that she sparks a change in the town's social dynamics. For example, Tilly dresses Ruth in a long-sleeve black top "with light beading that started at her nipples and accumulated at her waist" (179) to soften the effect of her sun-baked shoulders, while Purl, who wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe, wears a "frothy ice-green tulle skirt curled seductively from her tiny waist to hang in jagged handkerchief triangles about her beaded ankle straps and spike heels" (180). These are instances of how fashion is a narrative tool to reveal tensions, desires and contradictions within the community and how the arrival of Tilly adds a new layer to it.

Sergeant Farrat, on the other hand, uses fashion as a private and clandestine performative practice through which he negotiates desire, grief and non-normative forms of self-representation. After the death of Teddy McSwiney, Tilly's lover, he knocks at Tilly's door wearing "gaucho pants, a white Russian Cossack shirt and red quilted waistcoat with a black hat with flat brim balanced at a scandalous tilt on the side of his head" (208). This extravagant outfit stages what can be read as abjectness, that is, a performative surplus that transgresses the town's norms and therefore risks rejection. While Farrat's public identity is performed through the authority of the police uniform, his gingham skirts and Cossack shirt operate as a counter-performance that can only be sustained in secrecy. In Butlerian terms, Farrat's gendered self is brought into being through embodied acts of dressing whose meaning emerges in relation to social norms and spaces of surveillance. Clothing, in this sense, functions as a performative practice that enables and constrains what can be lived, seen and sustained as gender.

It is only at the end of the novel, when Farrat no longer cares what people think, that he attends Molly's funeral wearing a "black knee-length wool-crepe frock with a draped neck, a stylish lampshade overskirt cut asymmetrically, black stockings and sensible black pumps with a discreet leather flower stitched to the heel" (241). Tilly, a seamstress with a Singer sewing machine, becomes crucial here, as she gives him the strength needed to voice his fashion choices. This illustrates how clothing, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, is performative: it constitutes identity and does not just express it. Clothing, as gender, "is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999: 179). Farrat's internal conflict becomes an emblem of the town's tension between public performance and private truth.[1] His alliance with Tilly, as already noted, allows him to bring that hidden inner self to the surface, unsettling the rigid gender binaries imposed by Dungatar's dominant discourse.

Tilly is also a performer. She plays the part of the glamorous outsider —the European-trained seamstress— but beneath that persona is a woman marked by the trauma of exile and abandonment. Her designs reflect elegance and become acts of defiance. By dressing her enemies, Dungatar's townspeople, she gains control. They are actors within her play of revenge. As she measures and sews, she also gains the agency that she was once deprived by them. Fashion becomes her own weapon and Ham's narrative tool.

Yet, this empowerment through fashion is fleeting. Tilly's designs, once fabrics that differed, begin to homogenise Dungatar. The women become caricatures who hide again behind different, yet ordinary, masks. The masks imprison rather than liberate. In Bakhtinian terms, the masquerade fails to produce dialogic renewal and instead of subverting Dungatar's fixed identities, they reinforce the very social hierarchies they once seemed ready to overturn (1984: 270). What begins as a carnivalesque moment, both at the ball and at the play, becomes a well-known spectacle where transformation remains only at the surface. Tilly's designs, which were at first transformative tools, become again oppressive structures. This irony shows the fragile limits of aesthetic empowerment and what seems the impossibility of change. The townspeople dress themselves in Tilly's talent to perform new selves, but beneath the textiles, their cruelty remains untouched. In the end, fashion proves powerless to redeem an outdated community who cannot see its own decay. Thus, while fashion offers moments of empowerment, it also serves to expose the limits of individual and collective transformation within systems of repression. Ham suggests that true change requires more than surface alteration, as it demands systemic transformation and moral awareness. Fashion is a narrative tool to make a call for such awareness.

4. Theatricality and Performativity

Ham uses theatre as a metafictional intermezzo. There is a play within the novel that takes place in the last part. While the townspeople perform *Macbeth* while wearing the traditional Elizabethan costumes made by Tilly, which exaggerate their grotesqueness, Tilly sets fire to Dungatar. In Dungatar, since Tilly's return —and even before, as is the case of Sergeant Farrat— clothing is always a performance, from wedding gowns to matador capes. Every garment Tilly creates becomes a prop for the community to hide its past and reinvent itself. The choice of play, *Macbeth,* is deeply symbolic since Shakespeare's tragedy explores themes common to Dungatar, that is, ambition, guilt and the dynamics of power. Just as Lady Macbeth uses garments and appearances to hide her feelings of guilt and manipulate others, the townspeople of Dungatar dress in Tilly's designs to erase their past errors and change their social status for the better. The costumes for the performance —opulent and exaggerated, baroque— reflect a collective attempt to rewrite identities and gain control over their public image:

> The pictures showed men costumed in skirts with layers and layers of petticoats and yards and yards of lace dripping from arms covered in voluminous cuffed ruffles and frills. They posed on the page in stockings, below-knee pantaloons with godet bell-bottoms or deep flounces above high-heeled Cromwell slippers tied with large satin bows. Their hats were oversized and heavily plumed. The women wore three-tiered full skirts with ruffled bustles, elaborate multi-storied architect-designed fontanges, feather muffs and jackets with complicated jabots or frilled revers. (249-250)

Tilly does make them, although they are not her designs, but the ones from *The Complete Work of Shakespeare and Costumes Throughout the Ages.* Nevertheless, Tilly gave them her particular touch. For the community, the costumes were "perfect" (278), but for Tilly they were the ironic burden she was forced to wear in her youth. That is, they are heavy garments which represent murder and ambition: "Trudy circled them, her seventeenth-century baroque cast of the evil sixteenth-century Shakespeare play about murder and ambition" (278). The committee members of Dungatar Social Club read *The Complete Work of Shakespeare and Costumes*, but not the play itself. Some of them, like Muriel, do not even know who Shakespeare was: "'You've heard of him haven't you?' 'She may not have', said Mona. 'I hadn't until last week'" (250). On the other hand, Tilly can quote Act IV, Scene I by heart. This example highlights the dichotomy between Dungatar's community and Tilly, although, at this point, Tilly becomes powerful in comparison to the others. The first three parts of the novel, like the play, are an illusion, presenting Tilly's attempt to change and reconcile with Dungatar and its people as impossible, but this last part projects hope.

The play itself becomes not the final act, but the interlude to the final act, that is, the end of the novel. The rehearsal is pure chaos, showing the community's true self: "We've all got summer flu, sore throats and blocked sinus, no one's seen Elsbeth, everyone hates Trudy —I'd be a better director than her, at least I've *been* to the theatre" (279 , emphasis in original). Tilly sews her revenge, while Trudy, lacking a language of her own like Tilly's, gives voice to what she truly desires for the community, disregarding the social conventions imposed on her: "'I hope you develop dysentery and I hope you all get the pox and die of dehydration because enormous scabs all over your body ooze so much. I hope all your dicks turn shiny-black and rot off and I hope all you women melt inside and smell like a hot rotted fishing boat, I hope you —'" (280). Trudy's husband, William, slaps her face and warns her that if she makes a sound that night "we'll tie you to this chair with fishing line, fetch him and all swear on Bibles that you're mad" (281). Trudy was part of the community calling Molly "Mad Molly" and now the tide has turned.

On the other hand, if in the rehearsal we see this gendered power relation, it is inverted when Tilly visits Marigold Pettyman. Evan Pettyman was poisoning Marigold, making her sick and fragile. Tilly cures her by giving her marigold water. That is, Tilly gave Marigold her own strength back to confront Evan Pettyman, the man who took all her money, cheated on her and sent Tilly away. Marigold's performance in her own household mimics a character in *Macbeth*'s play: "He caught a flash of light as she reached behind his ankles and slid the razor-sharp carving knife across his calcanean tendons" (258). Evan Pettyman dies, and Marigold is free. However, the performance at Winyerp is not as successful. Although they receive the award for best costume, their poor performance after

Act I prompts the audience —"cast members' husbands and wives, mothers and children from Winyerp, Itheca and Dungatar" (292)— to leave, so that only the four judges remain. This emptiness seems to anticipate what they will encounter upon their return to Dungatar: "the entire town had been razed" (294).

The staging of *Macbeth* and the novel's ending position the community in an act of collective performativity. Butler underlines how identity is constituted through repeated social performances and, in this sense, both the play and the novel become a mirror for Dungatar. At the same time, Butler's emphasis on repetition allows readers to see how collective performance may consolidate normative identities, as the townspeople's theatrical masquerade reproduces the very gendered and social scripts it appears to expose. Wearing Tilly's costumes in the play —baroque, theatrical and historically inaccurate— reveals how fashion and identity are intertwined in a grotesque performance. They are no longer individuals, but characters and actors in a novel/on stage, acting out a script written by their own repression. The performance, both literally and metaphorically, represents self-exposure, which until then only the outcast characters —Tilly, Mad Molly, Sergeant Farrat, Marigold and Teddy— were able to see. Dungatar's citizens embody roles that were never truly theirs, and by performing them on stage, they parody themselves. Regarding these outcasts, both Mad Molly and Teddy end up dying and Tilly sets fire to Dungatar. For Sergeant Farrat, on the other hand, garments, which he wore in isolation, offer him an escape from the rigid dichotomy. Marjorie Garber underlines how cross-dressing is the "third term" outside binary genders, which resonates in Sergeant Farrat's wardrobe (in Bruzzi 1997: 150). His drag, which he can only perform in front of the other outcasts, challenges Dungatar's hegemonic masculinity. Tilly, too, performs multiple selves: the Parisian couturier or the dutiful daughter, for example. We could say then that fashion becomes a stage prop through which identity is recast repeatedly. Costumes offer the needed fluidity which defies certainty and possibility, and which does not offer a conclusion. Tilly's identity, like Farrat's, defies imposed categorisation and mirrors the performative instability of the self and the volatility of Dungatar.

Dungatar's spectacle recalls *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott 1994), where drag queens free themselves and parody societal norms in Australia. But unlike *Priscilla*, spectacle in *The Dressmaker* leads to downfall. Tilly burns her designs and the entire town to rid the space of its inherited violence. The performativity of fashion here reaches its climax: garments, once used to cover up, are sacrificed in the name of unveiling the truth. Before splashing the kerosene with which she sets fire to the house, she recites, "The night is long that never finds the day" (287), echoing Malcolm in *Macbeth*. It is thanks to the metafiction that we understand that the reign of Macbeth, here pointing to Dungatar, will end and give way to a new beginning. This dramatic conclusion proves that theatricality itself can be both a mask and a method of revelation. The curtain falls, the novel ends and what remains are the ashes of truth revealed and hope for a fresh start, free from systemic impositions.

5. Postmemory and Trauma

Tilly's trauma is what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls "postmemory", that is, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experience. Tilly embodies the unspoken shame of her mother, Molly, and her biological father, Evan Pettyman, which becomes her own curse. This trauma is not only personal but also political, since it is rooted in gendered violence and class injustice, as we have seen in the present article. Andrea Llano Busta claims that "The coexistence of these [historical] events with chiefly personal afflictions [...] transmutes their presence in the novel from a mere chronology to a chronicity of trauma" (2025: 178). Her exile from Dungatar is a punishment for a crime she did not commit and a symbolic erasure of both her mother's and her own agency. Both Tilly and Molly become passive characters without a voice of their own. Molly was trapped in the moniker "Mad Molly", not allowed by the community to shed the role. Tilly, on the other hand, separated from the community, regains her agency and, thanks to her sewing machine, denounces those responsible for her trauma.

Unfortunately, not seeing the possibility of change and, with it, feeling the lack of hope, she destroys the town and leaves Dungatar, although this time it is a choice and not an imposition. It is symbolic how, despite having burnt her designs, she waits for the train sitting on top of her Singer sewing machine: "Tilly Dunnage sat on her portable Singer sewing machine on the platform at the railway station watching grey steam clouds chuffing towards her from the golden horizon" (289). It is also symbolic that only Tilly Dunnage's chimney remains: "Nothing remained, except Tilly Dunnage's chimney" (295). Tilly left Dungatar first as a passive and submissive character, then returned active to become passive again, and she leaves the town as an active character. Only the chimney stands in Dungatar as if it were an extinct dominant discourse uttering its last words, soon to be replaced by a new, plural one.

We can affirm then that clothing functions as a visual language through which trauma can be transmitted and transformed. As Llano Busta underlines, "Gaining a full understanding becomes a daunting task caused by the paradox between verbalizing traumatic events as a way to overcome them [...] while considering that doing so may be regarded as a betrayal of the past. In the absence of language, sensory perceptions bear considerable relevance as they partially convey that reality still incomprehensible" (2019: 50). When the townspeople wear Tilly's designs, they momentarily inhabit her vision, but they also exploit it, using fashion to mask their own purpose, or so they think. Her garments become a double-edged sword, offering beauty while revealing their obscure side beneath the surface. Clothing thus serves as a stage for confrontation and a site for (post)memory. Tilly resurfaces the hidden truths of the town, stitching different meanings into the community's old wounds. Llano Busta adds that "[C]ommunities of memory can only exist as long as their members are not impervious to recollections beyond their own nor untouched by the traumas of others" (2025: 177).

In this way, Tilly's fashion acts as postmemory: clothing carries not only Tilly's story, but also, as we have addressed, Dungatar's repressed side. It becomes a signifier: "[t]he way people clothe themselves, together with the traditions of dress and finery that custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say the one that is the most immediately perceptible" (Fanon 2004: 43). For Fanon, clothing functions as a mechanism through which colonial power is internalised, disciplining bodies through mimicry and repetition; fashion, thus, becomes a space of alienation. The town shows a colonial identity through clothing which is an outdated and imposed European fashion: "They were standing about in pairs and bunches, leaning together, glancing down at their own frocks — pale spun rayon prints, shoulder pads, swathed waists, prominent bust lines, high prim collars, three-quarter sleeves, tweed suits, gloves and dumpy, eye-veiling head-hugging hats" (Ham 2015: 107).[2] Tilly's designs, also influenced by European standards, although fresh and not subsumed in the colonial past, attempt to celebrate non-normative identities. Each scrap and off-cut are "remnants of a fashion statement" (286) and, for Tilly, reminders of what caused her trauma. Each piece has a meaning:

> Stacked to the roof, shoved into every orifice in the small tumbling house were bags and bags of material bits spewing ribbon ends, frayed threads and fluff. Cloth spilled from dark corners and beneath chairs and clouds of wool lay about, jumbled with satin corners. Striped rags, velvet off-cuts, strips of velour, lamé, checks, spots, paisley and school uniform mixed with feather boas and sequin-spattered cotton, shearer's singlets and bridal lace. Coloured bolts stood propped against window sills and balanced across the armchair. (286)

Ham's meticulous portrayal of fashion as both a weapon and a shield illustrates how trauma is processed. Traumatic events can be so overwhelming that the person who experiences them cannot understand their dimension as trauma occurs. This unresolved material is repressed and stored, manifesting later in life. This is what Cathy Caruth named "belatedness" (1996: 3-4). The description above is an example of how all these pieces of thread scattered all over the house, which represent the material memory that caused Tilly her trauma, were too much.

Once out of hiding, Tilly is able to move on. Her final act of burning Dungatar is a feminist and postcolonial rejection of the surface and an act of advocacy to change the interior. To do so, Tilly has her sewing machine: "Her sewing machine waited erect on its housing table, an overlocker sitting forlornly at the bottom of the doorless entrance" (Ham 2015: 287). Setting fire to the fabrics is at once an attempt to destroy the trauma by converting thread into ashes and, at the same time, an act of purification. Tilly sitting on top of her sewing machine waiting for the train at the end of the novel leaves open the question of whether healing is possible without destruction. With her Singer machine she can sew another future, and Ham lets the reader imagine what is in store. Tilly is the "Waltzing Matilda" who travels and has a Singer machine as her swagman.

This end makes the reader think about the relationship between trauma, memory and reparation. Tilly's fire serves as a personal catharsis and constitutes her response to postmemory. Ham uses the metaphor of fire to underline loss and freedom and the hope for renewal. In the end, Tilly does rewrite Dungatar, since she leaves the space as a blank page to fill up. Through the language of fashion, she exposes the town's identity, ultimately refusing to mend its inhabitants with superficial stitches. This ending invites us to consider how clothing, like memory, carries the weight of generations, and how sometimes, to move forward, we must first burn the thin fabric that covers us up.

6. Conclusion

The Dressmaker exposes the political dimensions of clothing. Through Tilly, Ham critiques the Australian postcolonial condition, placing the outback as a repressive example permeated by gender binaries and trauma. Fashion is a metaphor for identity and a means of viewing and deconstructing it. Tilly's designs transform bodies and voice the complex entanglements of memory. Clothing, in this novel, proves to be performative, theatrical and symbolic. By destroying her own creations and the town itself, Tilly plays the final act: "She was wreathed in a brilliant halo, like a back-lit actor, dust from tailor's chalk and floc floating in shafts of light about her" (Ham 2015: 286). Burning Dungatar is an act of rebirth and a call for a future not stitched with the same old patterns. The novel challenges readers to acknowledge the material and symbolic power of clothing as a language in its own right and to reconsider the politics of appearance.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the University of Oviedo and in collaboration with Santander Bank.

Notes

1. In the film adaptation, his closet, full of silks and delicate accessories, serves as a sanctuary, a theatrical refuge from the oppressive demands of social norms

2. By contrast, Tilly's use of hybrid patterns, including, in the film adaptation though not in the novel, indigenous motifs and Australian flora and fauna, introduces alternative ways of being and, with them, new futures.

Works Cited

BAKHTIN, Mikhail. (1965) 1984. *Rabelais and his World*. Indiana U.P.

BRUZZI, Stella. 1997. *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. Routledge.

BUTLER, Judith. (1990) 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History.* The Johns Hopkins U.P.

ELLIOTT, Stephan. 1994. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

FANON, Frantz. 2004. "Algeria Unveiled". In Duara, Prasenjit (ed.) *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. Routledge: 42-55.

HAM, Rosalie. (2000) 2015. *The Dressmaker*. Serpent's Tail.

HIRSCH, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia U.P.

LLANO BUSTA, Andrea. 2019. "Mark My Words: The Trauma of Abducted Women in Two Short Stories by Ramapada Chaudhury". *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 6: 45-64. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/indialogs.125>.

LLANO BUSTA, Andrea. 2025. "'Across the Shadowy Landscape of Memory': A Relational Reading of Liminal Traumas in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?" International Journal of English Studies* 25 (1): 171-183.

Malhotra, Aanchal. 2017. *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. Harper Collins India.

Moorhouse, Jocelyn. 2015. *The Dressmaker*. Screen Australia.

Received: 22/06/2025
Accepted: 20/02/2026

Reviews

BORN IN THE U.S.A.: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IN AMERICAN LIFE, 3RD EDITION

Jim Cullen
Rutgers University Press, 2024.
https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611205

LUCÍA ALARCÓN REYES
Universidad de Sevilla
lucalarey@alum.us.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1258-2171

There is a growing worldwide interest in Bruce Springsteen's work within American and Pop Culture Studies. Scholars increasingly aim to provide readers with unprecedented access to his oeuvre. Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione's *Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans* (2023), Warren Zanes' *Deliver me from Nowhere* (2023) and Phillipe Margotin and Jean-Michel Guesdon's *Bruce Springsteen: All the Songs: The Story Behind Every Track* (2020) illustrate the different perspectives from which the artist has been studied recently. Jim Cullen, who holds a PhD in American Studies from Brown University and has published over twenty books —including *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003) and *Bridge & Tunnel Boys: Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, and the Metropolitan Sound of the American Century* (2023)— revisits his landmark work, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen in American Life*, initially published in 1997, to convey the prominent leitmotifs in the singer's output in the twenty-first century, providing an in-depth analysis of his last nine albums that broadens discussions from the previous two editions. This updated and expanded version is a must-read for fans and scholars interested in Springsteen's portrait of American society.

Cullen organizes the book into seven chapters that explore Springsteen's compositions in terms of politics, masculinity and religion, placing special emphasis on the singer's upbringing, influences and echoes from previous cultural movements in the US. The first two chapters explore the meaning behind the book's title, taking the misinterpretation of one of Springsteen's most iconic songs, "Born In The U.S.A." (1984), as a starting point. Both sections discuss how the New Jerseyan depicts the society of his country, particularly through the lens of the working class, aligning with the simplicity and "American artistic individuality" pursued by Walt Whitman. Cullen also explains how the writer, who has been baptized as "America's world poet", sought national identity through musical performances, firmly convinced that "he believed that it was music that was loved and shared by all Americans; it was music that could bring the nation together" (Kun 2016: 31). Building on the work of predecessors like Woody Guthrie or Stephen Foster, Springsteen evokes Whitman's legacy through lyrics, unlike Whitman's expansive poetry, characterized by its concise and economical expression. Both artists devote the vast majority of their work to the working class, while sharing "this passion for the open road", chasing the dream of upward mobility (Garman 2020: 226).

Yet, in the words of Springsteen, Presley revealed "a world that had been previously and rigorously denied was being PROVEN TO EXIST! It was a world with all of us in it… together… *all* of us" (Springsteen 2016: 40) due to his blues, gospel and R&B influences. This book outlines how Springsteen also aims to emphasize that *American* music is neither Black nor White, but rather encompasses all kinds, embracing the power of racial integration.

Linked to this sense of equality and justice, the fourth chapter, "Borne in the U.S.A.", delves deeper into how the singer deconstructs biased visions of the United States regarding the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This section remains the keystone of Cullen's book, as it sheds light on the rock icon's motivations for becoming the voice of his country's working class. While his previous album, *Nebraska* (1982), marked Springsteen's first engagement with broader societal issues in Reagan-era America, it was not until 1984, with *Born in the U.S.A.,* that he made the leap onto the global stage, addressing the social discontent of working-class America. Cullen also emphasizes how war is a recurrent theme for the New Jersey native, as it is "one of the most fundamental elements of human experience, and it powerfully shapes even those ignorant of its impact and legacy" (2024: 107).

While the four previous chapters establish the foundations of Springsteen's values and motifs, Cullen follows up with an exhaustive analysis of the duality of the American Dream in Springsteen's songs, both celebrating and criticizing it, particularly in relation to wealth and leisure. Chapter 5, titled "The Good Life", examines how the singer's narratives about working-class struggles expose the hollowness of a materialistic pursuit of a "good life". Being aware of this, a 26-year-old Springsteen personifying a contemporary Peter Pan would invite Wendy to pursue "the runaway American Dream" by escaping from a town "that rips the bones from your back", evading work-related responsibilities in what it is potentially his magnum opus, "Born to Run" (1975). Additionally, this section focuses on how songs like "Glory Days" or "My Hometown" (1984) grapple with the promise of prosperity and the collateral emotional consequences of chasing a higher social status. Nevertheless, Cullen appears to overlook some of Springsteen's recent songs, like "That's What Makes Us Great" (2017) or "Rainmaker" (2020), released during Trump's first term. Inclusion of these tracks would have provided valuable insight into the singer's reinterpretation of the American Dream in a contemporary context.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Cullen elaborates on how Springsteen's masculinity and religious beliefs are reflected in his work, contextualizing a wide array of songs across different life stages. The New Jersey native frequently explores manhood from various facets, often reflecting a sense of brotherhood with a touch of nostalgia as evidenced in "Glory Days" or "No Surrender", all tracks from *Born in the U.S.A.*, in which unfulfilled teenage dreams and an unequivocal melancholy seem to strengthen friendship. Cullen also delves into *Human Touch* (1992) and *Working on a Dream* (2009) to explore Springsteen's perception of companionship, as a rejection of traditional machismo. Nevertheless, the analysis of the latter lacks depth and is less detailed than that of earlier albums, offering only limited engagement with the lyrics. This section also analyzes the profound influence of the paternal figure on Springsteen's narratives. Through a close reading of works such as "Born to Run" (1975), "Adam Raised a Cain" (1978) or "My Father's House" (1982), the author explains how Douglas Springsteen simultaneously operates as an omnipresent influence and a haunting absence shaping the musician's narratives of conflict.

Chapter 7 elaborates on how Springsteen's Catholic upbringing is reflected in his songwriting. This spiritual facet adds another layer to the singer's storytelling, especially in tunes like "The River" (1980) or "Paradise" (2002), in which the protagonists struggle with moral dilemmas and search for hope amid chaos. Songs like "I'll See You In My Dreams" or "Ghosts", included in *Letter to You* (2020) would have enriched this analysis. Finally, Cullen draws parallels between religion and the devotion fans feel toward Springsteen, who embark on "pilgrimages" to attend his concerts. However, the question of how the musician builds strong bonds with international audiences remains unresolved and goes beyond the scope of this book.

Although this third edition of *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen in American Life* serves as an invaluable resource for those already familiar with his career, it is primarily focused on earlier works and does not engage as deeply with later albums like *Wrecking Ball* (2012). This album's depiction of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis could have enriched Cullen's discussion of Springsteen's working-class consciousness. Similarly, *A Letter to You* (2020) receives little attention in the book. Cullen disregards its emphasis on brotherhood, discussed in Chapter 6, even though it was the first studio recording with the E Street Band since 2012. The album also reconnects with Springsteen's early career through previously unreleased songs such as "If I Was A Priest", which links this teenage vision of America with his current one. These lingering questions could serve as a compelling starting point for future research. Nonetheless, this volume does a superb job of summarizing Springsteen's work over more than five decades, and its legacy will resonate for years to come.

Works Cited

Cullen, Jim. 2024. *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen in American Life* (3rd ed.). Rutgers University Press.

Garman, Bryan. 2020. "Bruce Springsteen's Working-class Aesthetic". *Journal of Popular Culture 53* (2): 220-239.

Kun, Josh. 2016. "The Music of America: The Power of Sound in Shaping National Identity". *American Quarterly* 68 (1): 31-55.

Mangione, Lorraine and Donna Luff. 2023. *Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Margotin, Philipe and Jean-Michel Guesdon. 2020. *Bruce Springsteen: All the Songs: The Story Behind Every Track*. Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers.

Springsteen, Bruce. 2016. *Born to Run*. Simon and Schuster.

Zanes, Warren. 2023. *Deliver Me From Nowhere*. University of Illinois Press.

Received: 14/11/2024
Accepted: 03/01/2026

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AFTERLIVES: THE AUTHOR AS CHARACTER IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND DRAMA

Monica Latham
Routledge, 2021

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202611191

PAULA MARTÍNEZ VEGA
Universidad de Valencia
paula.martinez-vega@uv.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8297-8849

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was one of the first authors to employ narrative devices in her fictional biographies, as seen in *Orlando* (1928), about Vita Sackville-West, and *Flush* (1933), about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. In recent decades, however, she has transcended her role as a writer and has herself become a character in contemporary biofictional novels. Indeed, these representations of Woolf have played an essential part in the foundation and legitimisation of biofiction in the current biographical field. In this respect, Monica Latham's groundbreaking book, *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives: The Author as Character in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* (2021), provides a new theoretical approach that sheds light on the relationship between biofiction and the English writer. The title belongs to the series Routledge Auto/Biography Studies, edited by Ricia A. Chansky, a specialist in autobiographical narratives. The objective of the series is to explore the growing field of (auto)biographical studies in dialogue with disciplines such as psychology or linguistics, highlighting the interdisciplinary character of these narratives.

In this volume, Latham examines a wide range of biofictional novels centred on Virginia Woolf to explore their use of reality and fiction to approach her posthumous persona. Bringing keen insight to the relationship between Woolf and her biofictional representations, the volume is a highly engaging contribution to the study of Woolf's literary and cultural legacy in the current literary panorama for both expert and novice scholars.

The volume is organised into seven chapters divided by thematic axes and includes a foreword by Michael Lackey —a leading voice in biofiction studies— an introduction and an epilogue that serves as a recapitulation. Across the different sections, Latham closely analyses 25 biofictional novels and plays published between 1972 and 2019 and analyses the wide-ranging portrayals of Woolf by contemporary authors.

Latham begins her analysis in chapter 1, "Bioplay(giarisms)s", where she offers a study on how Woolf's biographical events are (re)interpreted and (re)arranged by different contemporary writers, transforming her life into dramatic material open to a variety of interpretations. The authors analysed in this section are Eileen Atkins (*Vita and Virginia*), Edna O'Brien (*Virginia: a Play*), Elizabeth Steele (*Virginia Woolf and Companions: A Feminist Document. A Play*), Maureen Duffy (*A Nightingale in Bloomsbury Square*) and Christine Orban (*Vita et Virginia*). Latham emphasises the subjective portraits that these authors fabricate while drawing on the same historical material: "[a]lthough the material they dip into is much the same, the creative processes of selection, assembling and arranging the Woolfian intertextual fragments are different; so are the writers' imaginations and visions of their Virginia" (2021: 38). Latham contends that Woolf's fictionalisations, which range from hostile to positive representations, are commonly used to fulfil writers' aesthetic alliances or political agendas. This chapter provides a useful critical lens through which to examine the subsequent analyses of biofictional novels in the following chapters, as it lays the theoretical foundation for her readings.

Woolf's feminist ideals have been thoroughly explored both in literary studies and in broader feminist scholarship. This is precisely what chapter 2, "Detecting Woolf", deals with through the examination of two detective novels: Ellen Hawkes and Peter Manso's *The Shadow of the Moth: A Novel of Espionage with Virginia Woolf* (1983) and Stephanie Barron's *The White Garden: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2009). In a nuanced and insightful analysis, Latham explores how Woolf —a conventional feminist and feminine voice— is embroiled in masculine and aggressive power games and how writers use traditionally hegemonic male plots and devices —i.e. wars, spy plots, investigations— to analyse her gender equality discourses.

Chapter 3, "Virginia's Daughters", is dedicated to how Woolf's cultural and literary lineage is transmitted to new generations, who enhance her figure and foster the importance of her contributions. By looking at Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) and Clare Morgan's *A Book for All and None* (2011), Latham raises critical questions about the truth behind the idea of the "death of the author", postulated by Roland Barthes in the 1960s, as Woolf continues to cast a long shadow on the current literary scene and inspires a new generation of writers.

Woolf's complex relationship with her sister, Vanessa Bell, inspires the next chapter, titled "Vanessa and Virginia", which is grounded in the analysis of Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's *Virginia Woolf* (2012), Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and Her Sister* (2014), Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2009) and E.H. Wright's *Vanessa and Virginia: A One-Act Pla*y (2013). Latham discusses how these biofictions either reinforce or challenge the jealousy–love dualism traditionally linked to the two sisters. She concludes that biofiction enables writers to address questions that biography alone could not resolve, as it allows them to reconstruct the sisters in different situations to explore their personalities and relationship.

Latham focuses on Woolf's mental health and suicide in chapter 5, "Polarity, Pairs, Peers and Parallelisms", as seen in Norah Vincent's *Adeline: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2015), Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998) and Alienora Taylor's *Riding at the Gates of Sixty: A Fictional Account of Virginia Woolf's Death and Life* (2015). These biofictions establish a direct conversation with her fragile psychological state and establish an intertextual link between Woolf's writings and her biofictional represensations.

In chapter 6, "Biofictive Mirrors: Clarissa Woolf/Virginia Dalloway", Latham further explores the connection and similarities between Virginia Woolf and Clarissa Dalloway, the main character in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1915), in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) and in Robin Lippincott's *Mr Dalloway* (1999). In a well-crafted analysis, Latham examines the postmodern, hypertextual resources used in these novels to create a hybrid character that merges the creator and the creation. As a consequence, these novels blur the boundaries of intertextual elements and merge biography and textual references to address current political, social and public issues, both from Woolf's time and from the contemporary period.

Latham concludes her analysis in chapter 7, "Bloomsberries Reimagined", which is concerned with the Bloomsbury Group. Defined as a convergence of intellectuals and artists living in London at the beginning of the 20th century, this cohort's contributions to the literary, social and artistic field were large. Through Peter Luke's *Bloomsbury: A Play in Two Acts* (1976) and Gillian Freeman's *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury* (2006), Latham examines how the group has been culturally perceived across 30 years. She also stresses the role that fictionalisation plays in the promulgation of biographical details, as it enables the writer to convey the truth in an efficient way.

Latham concludes the monograph with "Posthumous Lives: 'I Am Made and Remade Continually'", in which she looks into Woolf as a long-lasting figure in the literary field at the same time that she examines how biofiction can help the Woolfian oeuvre to retain a relevant place in today's culture. Indeed, she explains how "the death of the author" promulgated by Roland Barthes in the 1960s is defied by biofiction, as writers like Woolf gain predominance. Finally, she summarises that there are as many Virginias as biofictional portrayals, her figure constantly changing through the eyes of the authors that represent her.

Altogether, *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives* is a contribution not only to biofiction studies but also to Woolf studies in general. It is one of the most complete and intrageneric studies to date on how the posthumous image of a writer can be shaped through narrative strategies of fictionalisation. Carefully crafted and organised, Latham's book provides cogent insights into the different genres that comprise biofiction and how Woolf's image is adapted to various literary and intertextual necessities. Moreover, she performs a thorough study of the different aspects of the author's life that have been fictionalised, supplying a referential theoretical framework that could enhance the reading of current Woolfian biofiction.

Although this monograph may not be well-suited for scholars seeking in-depth information on the history and overall contributions of biofiction —as it mainly focuses on Woolf— it provides a well-rounded start to expand knowledge on the matter, both for students and experienced scholars. Taken along with monographs such as *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature* (2023) edited by Monica Latham, Caroline Marie and Anne-Laure Rigeade, and Monica Latham's *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway* (2017), *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives* reveals the complexity and intertextual implications of Woolf's representations in current biofiction and becomes a necessary referent within the state of this question. All in all, the text includes concepts and case studies that render it a valuable reference work from which a broader body of scholarship can be developed — one that could enrich and diversify the study of biofiction and, particularly, of Woolf's afterlives.

Acknowledgments

This work has been possible thanks to a pre-doctoral contract funded by the Conselleria de Educación, Cultura, Universidades y Empleo and the European Social Fund (CIACIF/2024/288).

Works Cited

BARTHES, Roland. 1967. "Death of the Author". *Aspen Magazine,* 5/6.

LATHAM, Monica. 2017. *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway*. Palgrave MacMillan.

LATHAM, Monica. 2021. *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives. The Author as Character in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Routledge.

LATHAM, Monica, Caroline MARIE and Anne-Laure RIGEADE. (eds.) 2023. *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature*. Routledge.

Received: 30/10/2024
Accepted: 17/01/2026

BODAS DE SANGRE. EN UNA ADAPTACIÓN DE MARINA CARR, DE FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

Melania Terrazas Gallego y Salma Errami Fennane, trad. e intro.
Universidad de La Rioja, 2025

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202612780

DIANA I. LUQUE
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
diana.luque@uam.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6971-8891

Las culturas española e irlandesa se entrelazan históricamente. No solo algunas regiones del norte de España comparten el folclore celta, también existen similitudes en sus tradiciones musicales y dancísticas, al tiempo que la influencia teatral mutua ha sido notoria. Así, la traducción y edición de Juan Ramón Jiménez y Zenobia Camprubí de *Jinetes hacia el mar*, de John Millington Synge, incidió sustancialmente en la escritura de *Bodas de sangre*. Décadas más tarde, Marina Carr, la dramaturga por excelencia del denominado "nuevo teatro irlandés", reescribe el clásico lorquiano en una propuesta cultural híbrida, que fusiona la poeticidad, la rudeza descarnada y el humor mordaz distintivos de sus celebradas reinterpretaciones de los mitos y las tragedias grecolatinas, con el particular simbolismo y la belleza poética del dramaturgo granadino. Estrenada en septiembre de 2019 en el Young Vic londinense, la puesta en escena de Yaël Farber recibió estupendas críticas de público y prensa, que destacaban el simbolismo escénico y la formidable interpretación de Olwen Fouéré en el papel de Madre; si bien, cuestionaban el registro simbólico poético que la dramaturga irlandesa incorpora hacia el final de la pieza. El texto de esta versión libre se presenta ahora al lector y lectora hispanohablante en una traducción de Melania Terrazas Gallego y Salma Errami Fennane publicada por la Universidad de La Rioja. El volumen incluye una amplia introducción académica que reseña brevemente el teatro de Marina Carr, expone el contexto cultural y sociológico del texto lorquiano, analiza los principales aspectos de la versión de la dramaturga irlandesa y ofrece una amplia justificación de las motivaciones de su traducción y publicación en español, argumentando las principales técnicas y mecanismos de traslación lingüística y local realizados.

Cabe destacar que Marina Carr es una de las dramaturgas irlandesas más prolíficas e influyentes de nuestro tiempo. Su producción dramática ha sido galardonada con notables reconocimientos, como el Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, la Macaulay Fellowship, E.M. Forster Prize de la Academia Americana de las Artes y las Letras o el reputado Windham-Campbell Prize de la Universidad de Yale. En la última década se percibe un creciente interés por el teatro de Carr en el ámbito teatral y académico español, con varias traducciones de sus textos, tesis doctorales en torno a su obra y el estreno de *Mármol* (2016) en el Teatro Valle-Inclán del Centro Dramático Nacional, bajo la dirección de Antonio C. Guijosa. Enrique Singer ha llevado a las tablas *La niña en el altar* (2025) en México y Oscar Barney Finn ha estrenado *La niña sobre un altar* (2025) y *Mármol* (2022) en Argentina.

Marina Carr ubica la acción de *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*) en la Irlanda rural de las Midlands y sustenta el conflicto en una disputa entre familias motivada por una violación y subsecuentes asesinatos como desagravio, que instauran un ciclo de violencia y venganza reminiscente al de las estirpes de los clásicos grecolatinos. Su versión sigue la trama lorquiana hasta la segunda escena del Acto II, con significativos cambios en el desenlace, e intensifica los rasgos machistas y la violencia del texto original, a fin de denunciar su perpetuación en las sociedades actuales: las mujeres jóvenes se ven sometidas tanto por los hombres como por las mujeres de edad, reducidas a su labor doméstica y reproductora, obligadas a engendrar y criar varones belicosos que perpetúen la familia y las reyertas tribales. El personaje de la Madre es una Clitemnestra vengativa que defiende férreamente el sistema patriarcal que limita las libertades de las mujeres; mientras que la Novia es desafiante y se niega a someterse a la voluntad de su futura suegra, pero también al destino trágico que le ofrece Leonardo —más posesivo y vengativo que apasionado en esta versión. El lenguaje de los personajes es incisivo, de una agresividad más visceral que los de Lorca, y sus motivaciones varían notablemente, redimensionándolos. Carr reduce el reparto: elimina a la Suegra, las Muchachas, los Mozos y uno de los Leñadores, mientras que la Vecina se convierte en la Tejedora, un trasunto de las Parcas. La Luna y los dos Leñadores asumen el rol del coro y ofrecen un comentario musical de los acontecimientos. En esta versión, la Luna tiene mayor presencia escénica e incorpora parlamentos de los personajes populares omitidos, mientras que los Leñadores podrían recordar a los sepultureros de *Hamlet*. Por añadidura, sobre el destino de la Novia pesa el de su madre, La Manchita, dilapidada por su promiscuidad y su carácter libre; una figura pseudo mítica ideada por la autora con la que parece subvertir el *fatum* trágico y señalar el rol activo de la sociedad como responsable del destino de los personajes.

Más allá de estas aportaciones, que modifican esencialmente la tragedia original, traducir la obra de Carr es siempre un auténtico reto lingüístico. Los personajes se expresan en un lenguaje elaborado conforme a las particularidades fónicas y sintácticas del hibernoinglés, el conjunto de dialectos nativos de Irlanda; en concreto, del área de las Midlands, de donde procede la dramaturga. El hibernoinglés suele anteponer los complementos al sujeto y al verbo, y emplear el léxico inglés. El resultado es una oralidad peculiar, muy orgánica, con una composición sintáctica tensionada. Por otro lado, Carr suele acuñar términos inusuales, elaborar metáforas insólitas y emplear un lenguaje incisivo. En este caso, su singular poética se fusiona con la del dramaturgo granadino, resignificando algunos símbolos y motivos, e incorporando otros —un enorme Cristo crucificado, un rosario de perlas, los vínculos sanguíneos y de raza, etc.

No es la primera vez que Melania Terrazas Gallego se enfrenta al desafío de traducir a Carr. En *Junto a la ciénaga de los gatos* (2022), que firma conjuntamente con Álvaro Martínez de la Puente Molina, optaron por llevar a cabo una traslación local y elaborar una reinterpretación lingüística a partir del habla caló o romaní. En esta ocasión, las traductoras se decantan por idear un registro no estándar pseudo-dialectal a partir de "la fraseología y el léxico del discurso andaluz rural, precisamente por el valor simbólico que exhiben en la obra de Lorca" (Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane 2025: 32). Con este propósito, efectúan una adaptación gráfica que se asemeja a la que la propia Marina Carr realizó en sus primeras obras, particularmente en *Portia Coughlan*, donde trataba de reproducir textualmente la oralidad del lenguaje de las Midlands, estilizando los sonidos vocálicos y omitiendo la "t" final de las palabras o sustituyéndola por una "h", entre otros recursos:

> PORTIA.- Have wan wud me an me birtha.
>
> RAPHAEL.- Ah this hour, ya mus' be ouha yar mine. (en Roche 2009: 251)

El resultado es una reelaboración lingüística que insta a ser pronunciada y encarnada, a devenir "poesía que se sale del libro para hacerse humana" (García Lorca y Morales 1936), respondiendo, inadvertidamente, a la definición de teatro concebida por Lorca. No obstante, esta estilización, en ocasiones, dificultaba la comprensión lectora, por lo que los editores tendían a estandarizar el lenguaje:

> PORTIA.- Have one with me —on me birthday *(a drink)*.
>
> RAPHAEL.- At this hour, ya must be out of your mind. (Carr 1999: 194)

Este mismo impulso de volverse palabra dicha y encarnada en escena se encuentra en la adaptación gráfica y lingüística de Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane. En su amplia introducción justifican y detallan las traslaciones idiomáticas y culturales efectuadas, que pasan por tratar de "reproducir" el acento andaluz y adaptar el discurso al contexto español. Para ello, llevan a cabo modificaciones fonéticas, como la eliminación de consonantes finales, particularmente /s/, /l/ y /d/

("ehtáh" o "verdá", por "estás" o "verdad"), la aspiración o elisión de la /s/ y /z/ ("cosah" o "veh", por "cosas" o "vez"), el uso de artículos y pronombres andaluzados ("loh" o "elloh", en vez de "los" o "ellos") y la alteración de acentos, la reducción de vocales, las simplificaciones de grupos consonánticos ("viví" por "vivir") y la elisión de la /d/ intervocálica ("rajao" en vez de "rajado", "demasiá" en lugar de "demasiada") del habla andaluza. Asimismo, reproducen los fenómenos de lenición, yeísmo y la neutralización de consonantes ("er kabáyo" por "el caballo"). Las metáforas y expresiones idiomáticas o dialectales irlandesas y el argot han requerido de una traslación cultural equivalente. De este modo, "You puttin the kybosh on yourself and your groom" se traduce como "¿Te ehtáh poniendo impedimentoh a ti misma y a tu novio?" (García Lorca 2025: 87), "you've my head janglin with your rawmaysh!" como "¡Me estáh poniendo la cabeza como un bombo con tuh sinsentíoh!" (García Lorca 2025: 88) y "ye" alternativamente por "vosotros" o "ustedes", por ofrecer algunos ejemplos. Por último, las traductoras incorporan expresiones coloquiales e idiomáticas de la España rural: "agua pasada no mueve molinoh" (García Lorca 2025: 70) por "let bygones be bygones", o "¿Y de ónde voy a sacá yo noticias en ehte bujero perdío de la mano de Dioh?" por "And where would I get news in this godforsaken hole of the fallen world? (García Lorca 2025: 66).

El proceso de relocalización de la obra a la cultura andaluza, la reelaboración lingüística y fonética, así como el uso de la fraseología y el léxico del discurso andaluz rural, si bien pretenden acercar el texto al público hispanohablante, desdibujan, en ocasiones, algunos de los hallazgos lingüísticos y culturales de Carr, dado que buena parte del interés de su versión radica, precisamente, en la insólita hibridez cultural hispano irlandesa. Por otro lado, pese a que las traductoras recurren al "registro coloquial español" —i.e. andaluz— como "forma neutral" (Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane 2025: 41) a fin de "preservar la naturalidad y accesibilidad del diálogo sin imponer características que podrían desvirtuar el tono y los matices de los personajes originales" (Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane 2025: 40), dicha elección lingüística inevitablemente modifica los rasgos socioculturales de estos, al tiempo que introduce en el lenguaje un tono, un ritmo y una cadencia nuevos —como las propias traductoras reconocen (Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane 2025: 44 y 48)— dado que ningún registro lingüístico está exento de particularidades distintivas o expresivas.

Por otro lado, la versión de Marina Carr trata de aproximar el universo lorquiano y cierto contexto andaluz al público irlandés. De ahí que incorpore alusiones explícitas al asesinato del granadino —en la Escena Uno del Acto III— y adaptaciones de algunos de sus poemas más célebres, como "Romance Sonámbulo". Carr imprime en estos versos un ritmo cortante muy particular, por lo que su traducción al español resulta en una sonoridad y una cadencia distintas a las del original lorquiano. Si bien la traducción de poesía es siempre compleja y conlleva pérdidas semánticas, sintácticas y rítmicas inevitables, en este caso, la familiaridad del público hispano con el célebre romance torna extraños los versos de Carr traducidos:

> Te quiero verde.
> Viento verde. Ramas verdes.
> Velero en el océano.
> Caballo en la montaña.
>
> Te quiero verde.
> Bajo la luna gitana.
> Estrellas verdes en la escarcha.
> Amanecer verde.
> Montaña verde. […] (García Lorca 2025: 85)

La "Nana del caballo grande que no quiso el agua" (García Lorca 2012: 102-105), que cantan la Suegra y la Mujer en el Cuadro segundo del original lorquiano, también ha sido adaptada en versos libres por la autora irlandesa. En este caso, Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane optan por reelaborar y distribuir en estrofas el *quatrain* y la tirada de versos libres de Carr:

> Nana, mi pajarito,
> en ehta ohcura ehquina,
> onde lohtigreh se comen a suh críah,
> y lah hormigah devoran a loh muertoh en la ruina.
>
> Había un kabáyo
> que no bebía,
> del arroyo viviente,
> ehpuma que fluye con lah ramah movía. […] (García Lorca 2025: 71).

Si el original de Lorca ofrece cambios inesperados en su registro dramático, al aunar realismo, simbolismo y lirismo, la versión de la dramaturga irlandesa resulta aún más rupturista. Mientras que en el clásico lorquiano, la Luna y la Muerte son personajes simbólicos que guían el destino trágico de los personajes y dotan al texto de trascendencia, el texto de Carr reelabora algunos motivos históricos en una pseudo mitología que liga el destino de los personajes al de sus consanguíneos ancestrales. De este modo, la escena doméstica de las Muchachas que devanan la madeja roja en el Cuadro último de Lorca, cargada de simbolismo trágico, deviene en la versión de Carr explícitamente simbólica: la Tejedora, una suerte de Parca que urde y corta las entrañas de los protagonistas, evoca a los antepasados. Las voces de estos actualizan la atrocidad del asesinato de La Manchita y de las matanzas históricas de árabes, judíos y gitanos. Son augurios de un sino para los personajes más sanguinario e implacable, si cabe, en la dramaturgia de Carr, donde la venganza de ambas familias recae sobre La Novia.

Junto al horror evocado en imágenes de una contundencia sobrecogedora, la versión de Marina Carr ofrece un humor mordaz y una poeticidad notorias. Esta celebrada versión del clásico lorquiano es audaz, pertinente, instruida y reveladora. La universalidad de la poesía y del teatro del dramaturgo granadino es incuestionable; con todo, no deja de sorprender cómo la reelaboración escénica del suceso local del "crimen de Níjar" resuena décadas más tarde en las problemáticas sociales vigentes en Irlanda y España: el férreo poder del catolicismo, el machismo cultural y el sometimiento de las mujeres —reducidas aquí a poco más que ganado— las constricciones sociales y el honor, la perpetuación de la violencia y la venganza, las disputas por la tierra, los matrimonios de conveniencia, las reyertas entre familias —que en uno y otro país rememoran sendas guerras civiles— etc. La fusión cultural y de imaginarios y estilos tan contundentes, como son los de Lorca y Carr, proporciona una mirada renovada sobre el texto lorquiano. Por todo ello, la ponderada y elaborada traducción de Terrazas Gallego y Errami Fennane supone una relevante aportación académica a los estudios teatrales y culturales, la traducción y la literatura comparada, al tiempo que contiene un potencial escénico incuestionable. Sin lugar a dudas, interesará observar cómo las traslaciones lingüísticas y socioculturales planteadas por las traductoras son trabajadas y encarnadas por los y las intérpretes y acogidas por el público en una futura puesta en escena en España y los países de Hispanoamérica. Las comparaciones con el original lorquiano suponen un desafío; si bien, este texto celebra, precisamente, la contemporaneidad y universalidad del poeta granadino, así como la hibridación de dos culturas y dos poéticas inestimables.

Works Cited

Carr, Marina. 1999. *Plays 1: Low in the Dark, The Mai, Portia Coughlan, By the Bog of Cats....* Faber and Faber.

Carr, Marina. 2022. *Junto a la ciénaga de los gatos...* Trad. e introd. M. Terrazas Gallego y A. Martínez de la Puente Molina. Universidad de La Rioja.

García Lorca, Federico. 2012. *Bodas de sangre*. Ed. Allens Josephs y Juan Caballero (24ª edición). Cátedra.

García Lorca, Federico. 2019. *Blood Wedding, in a version by Marina Carr*. Faber and Faber.

García Lorca, Federico. 2025. *Bodas de sangre. En una adaptación de Marina Carr*. Trad. e introd. M. Terrazas Gallego y S. Errami Fennane. Universidad de La Rioja.

García Lorca, Federico y Felipe Morales. 1936. "Qué es la poesía y el teatro. Entrevista". *La Voz de Madrid*. <https://monicatello.es/al-habla-con-federico-garcia-lorca-entrevista-de-felipe-morales-que-es-la-poesia>. Acceso 18 de marzo, 2015.

Roche, Anthony. 2009. *Contemporary Irish Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Terrazas Gallego, Melania y Salma Errami Fennane. 2025. "Introducción". En García Lorca, Federico. *Bodas de sangre. En una adaptación de Marina Carr*. Trad. e introd. M. Terrazas Gallego y S. Errami Fennane. Universidad de La Rioja: 9-49.

Recibido: 08/01/2026
Aceptado: 11/02/2026

Notes for contributors

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal published twice a year by the Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza, Spain. In addition to the printed version of the journal, current and back issues of the journal are available online at the following website:

https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/misc

Miscelánea publishes articles on English language and linguistics, on literatures written in English, and on thought, cinema and cultural studies from the English-speaking world.

General format and style guide

All manuscripts should follow the style guidelines of the 7th edition of the *American Psychological Association* (APA) Style.

How to contribute

Contributions, in English or Spanish, should neither be published nor considered for publication elsewhere.

The recommended length for articles is **6,000** to **8,000** words.

Authors are expected to upload their anonymous contributions on the journal webpage.

An abstract of no more than 200 words should also be provided, together with five key words and a translation into Spanish when possible.

Authors should consult and follow our journal's Code of Ethics before submitting their manuscript.

Non-discriminatory language should be endorsed throughout manuscripts, making use of inclusive expressions and avoiding gender and racist-biased references.

Authors are encouraged to indicate whether the research data used in their studies take sex and/or gender into account in order to identify possible differences that may result from it.

Reviews are also accepted of books that are of general interest in the field of English studies and that have been published within the last four years (recommended length: **1,500** words). They should not only be a mere description of the contents of the book, but should also provide an explanation of its contribution to the field within which it belongs. Reviews will also be refereed.

Notes (brief reports on language, literature, history and lexicography) are also accepted.

Invited (non-refereed) contributions from leading scholars will be acknowledged as such.

There will be no restrictions placed on authors' use of their material for reprints or other publications as long as their first publication is acknowledged.

Reviewing process

Papers may be published if they receive favourable reports from reviewers who are specialists in the area. Every article is evaluated anonymously by a minimum of two referees, one at least belonging to a university other than that of Zaragoza. Reviewers will not be apprised of the authorship of these articles. The authorship of the reports will also be confidential, though their purport may be communicated to the contributors concerned if so desired.

Reviewers will be required to weigh up the articles that are sent to them and make out as soon as possible a written report describing the article in terms of the points itemized in an evaluation form. In the case of articles that have not been accepted or need revision, an additional report will be made out indicating the reasons for non-acceptance, or the changes to be made as the case may be.

Selection of contributions

The criteria for selecting contributions will be: their global interest and originality, their theoretical and methodological rigour, the development of a well defined thesis, the quality of their style and the general observance of the norms required of work of an academic nature. The papers submitted should evince serious academic work contributing new knowledge or innovative critical perspectives on the subject in question. Articles that are of a merely popularising nature will not be accepted.

Although every effort will be made to publish contributions that have received favourable reports, the Editors reserve the right to make a further and final selection when the number of contributions with favourable reports is in excess of the number of articles that can be conveniently published in one issue of the Journal. In the case of partially negative reports as well as positive ones on the same article, the final decision will lie with the discretion of the Editors, who will weigh up the reports and the general interest of the subject matter of the article. Additional reports may also be sought.

The articles submitted should stick to the Publication Guidelines included in this volume (see below). Manuscripts not conforming to these guidelines will be returned to the authors for revision. The Editors may correct clerical or factual errors and introduce stylistic corrections without further notice.

For additional information, contact the Editors, Beatriz Oria Gómez, Miguel Ángel Benítez Castro and María Ferrández San Miguel at the following address or via e-mail:

Beatriz Oria Gómez (literature, film and cultural studies)

Miguel Ángel Benítez Castro (language and linguistics)

María Ferrández San Miguel (reviews)

Revista *Miscelánea*
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Pedro Cerbuna, 12
Universidad de Zaragoza
50009 Zaragoza
SPAIN

miscelanea@unizar.es

PUBLICATION GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Citations

Double quotation marks should be used for citations. Single quotes may be used to draw attention to a particular item in the text. Italics are used for foreign words, or for emphasis. References in the text to publications should include the author's surname, the year of publication, and, if necessary, page numbers, as in the following examples:

As Bachelard claims, while past memories are important, "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (2004: 5, my emphasis), which raises a question about the quality of living.

According to Shaw, the works belonging to this genre are concerned with either reflecting imaginatively, responding directly or dealing with the socio-cultural, economic and racial consequences that followed the UK's exit from the European Union (2021: 4).

…language always fulfils three communicative functions (Jewitt et al. 2016).

…this idea has been rejected by several authors (Reger 2017; Evans 2015; Cochrane 2013).

As Suárez Orozco suggests …. (in Inda 2014: 34).

Should part of the original text be omitted, this will be made clear by inserting […], NOT (…).

Should the emphasis be in the original text, this will be explicitly indicated as "emphasis in original". Should the emphasis be added by the author, "my emphasis" should be added: (Bordwell 2006: 73, emphasis in original).

Bibliographical references

Bibliographical references should be included in alphabetical order at the end of the manuscript and under the heading WORKS CITED. In the Works Cited all references used should be included and not more.

Authors' full first names should be used unless the authors themselves customarily use only initials. Set the author's surname(s) in small caps (e.g. Joyce, neither Joyce nor JOYCE).

References to two or more works by the same author in a single year should be accompanied by a lower-case a, b, etc. after the year of publication, both in the reference list and in citations in the text. If two works by the same author are cited, but in one of them there is a second author, the latter will go after.

Hyland, Ken. 2017a. "Metadiscourse: What Is it and Where Is it Going?" *Journal of Pragmatics* 113: 16-29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.03.007>.

Hyland, Ken. 2017b. "English in the Discipline: Arguments for Specificity". *ESP Today* 5 (1): 5-23.

Hyland, Ken and Feng Kevin Jiang. 2021. "'Our Striking Results Demonstrate…': Persuasion and the Growth of Academic Hype". *Journal of Pragmatics* 182: 189-202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.06.018>.

References to books should include the publisher's name, and references to articles in journals should include volume, issue number (if necessary) and page numbers. Titles of books and journals will be written in italics. Titles of articles and of book chapters will be placed in double inverted commas.

The DOI should be included for all references that have it (see https://doi.crossref.org/simpleTextQuery).

Monographs:

AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S), Author's first name(s). Year. *Title in italics.* Place: Publisher.

NAGEL, James. 2015. *The American Short Story Handbook*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S), Author's first name(s). (Year of 1st edition) Year of edition actually used. *Title in italics.* Place: Publisher.

BAUMAN, Zygmunt. (2005) 2017. *Liquid Life*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity.

EDITOR'S SURNAME(S), Editor's first name(s). (ed.) Year. *Title in italics.* Place: Publisher.

MCNAMARA, Kevin R. (ed.) 2014. *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

FIRST AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S), First author's first name(s), Second author's first name(s) SECOND AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S) and Third author's first name(s) THIRD AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S). Year. *Title in italics.* Place: Publisher.

PAHTA, Päivi, Janne SKAFFARI and Laura WRIGHT. (eds.) 2017. *Multilingual Practices in Language History: English and Beyond*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S), Author's first name(s). Year. *Title in italics.* Trans. Translator's initials. Translator's surname(s). Place: Publisher.

ATWOOD, Margaret. 2017. *El cuento de la criada*. Trans. E. Mateo. Barcelona: Salamandra.

Chapter or article in a monograph:

If only one chapter or article has been used:

AUTHOR'S SURNAME(S), Author's first name(s). Year. "Title in double inverted commas". In Editor's surname(s), Editor's first name(s) (ed.) *Title of monograph in italics.* Place: Publisher: 00-00.

LEONARD, Suzanne. 2014. "Escaping the Recession? The New Vitality of the Woman Worker". In Negra, Diane and Yvonne Tasker (eds.) *Gendering the*

Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity. Durham and London: Duke U.P.: 31-58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fr9.5>.

If two or more chapters/articles have been used:

Author's Surname(s), Author's first name(s). Year. "Title in double inverted commas". In Editor's surname(s), Editor's first name(s) (ed.): 00-00. (The reference of the edited book should be written, in full, as a separate entry).

Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. 2014. "'Latina Wisdom' in 'Postrace' Recession Media". In Negra, Diane and Yvonne Tasker (eds.) *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Durham and London: Duke U.P.: 59-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fr9.6>.

Negra, Diane and Yvonne Tasker. 2014. *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Durham and London: Duke U.P. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376538>.

If the book is a compilation of another author's works:

Author's Surname(s), Author's first name(s). (Year of 1st edition) Year of edition actually used. In Editor's surname(s), Editor's first name(s) (ed.) *Title in italics*. Place: Publisher.

Wilde, Oscar. 2017. In Donohue, Joseph (ed.). *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 10: Plays 3: The Importance of Being Earnest; 'A Wife's Tragedy' (fragment)*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.

If the author of the collection and of the short piece being cited are the same

Author's Surname(s), Author's first name(s). Year. "Title in double inverted commas". In *Title of monograph in italics*. Place: Publisher: 00-00.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 2004. "Curly Red". In *I Am No One You Know: Stories*. New York: Harper Collins: 3-20.

Article in a journal:

Author's Surname(s), Author's first name(s). Year. "Title in double inverted commas". *Name of journal* in *italics* number (volume): 00-00. DOI (if given).

Lu, Xiaofei. 2011. "A Corpus-Based Evaluation of Syntactic Complexity Measures as Indices of College-Level ESL Writers' Language Development". *TESOL Quarterly* 45 (1): 36-62. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2011.240859>.

Article in a journal special issue:

Author's Surname(s), Author's first name(s). Year. "Title in double inverted commas". *Name of special issue in italics*. Special issue of *Name of journal in italics* number (volume): 00-00. DOI (if given).

Adami, Elisabetta. 2018. “Styling the Self Online: Semiotic Technologization in Weblog Publishing”. *Social Media as Semiotic Technology*. Special issue of *Social Semiotics* 28 (5): 601-622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1504713>.

Citations on electronic sources:

Author’s Surname(s), Author’s first name(s). Year (if given). “Title in double inverted commas”. Information about print publication (if given). <Information about electronic publication>. Access information.

Morris, Regan. 2018. “Is #meToo Changing Hollywood?”. *BBC News* (March). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43219531>. Accessed March 18, 2022.

If no author is given, begin the entry with the title of the document, inserted in alphabetical order with the rest of the references.

“The return of Sir Thomas Phillipps’ Italian manuscripts to Italy”. 2021. *Institute of English Studies* (blog). (July 2). <https://englishstudies.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2021/07/02/the-return-of-sir-thomas-phillipps-italian-manuscripts-to-italy/>. Accessed March 18, 2022.

Films:

Director’s Surname(s), Director’s first name(s). Year. *Title in italics.* Production Company.

Ross, Matt. 2016. *Captain Fantastic*. Electric City Entertainment.

Television shows, series and limited series:

Creator’s Surname(s), Creator’s first name(s). Year(s). *Title in italics.* Broadcast studio.

Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. 2016-2019. *Fleabag*. BBC Three and Amazon Prime Video.

The following norms should also be taken into account:

- Keywords should be written in lower case, unless they are proper nouns and they need to be separated by a comma (not a semicolon). A full stop needs to be included at the end.
- Endnotes, which should appear before the Works Cited list, should be as few and short as possible, and their corresponding numbers in the main text should be typed as superscripts.

- Additional comments should appear in between long dashes: (—) rather than (-); —this is an example—, leaving no spaces in between the dashes and the text within them.
- There should be no full stops after interrogation and exclamation marks.
- Inverted commas should never appear after punctuation marks (e.g. "this is correct", but "this isn't.").
- Current (CG Times or Times New Roman) typefaces should be used, and special symbols should be avoided as much as possible.
- "&" should be avoided whenever possible.
- Generally speaking, punctuation and orthography should be coherent (British or American style) all through the article. For example: "emphasise/recognise" rather than "emphasize/recognise"; "colour/colour" rather than "colour/color".
- Authors are encouraged to divide their articles into entitled subsections. Capitalizations in such subsection headings should follow APA guidelines.
- In the case of co-authored articles, the specific contribution of each author will be indicated in the manuscript. This section will be added before the Works Cited list.
- Funding agency/agencies and project code(s) should be indicated in the Acknowledgements section (not as an endnote) and should be placed before Endnotes.

EXCHANGE POLICY

Miscelánea welcomes exchanges with other scholarly publications. Please write to:

> *Miscelánea* (intercambios)
> Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
> Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
> Universidad de Zaragoza
> 50009 Zaragoza (Spain)

The basic exchange rate for periodical publications is established on the basis of annual volumes. Quarterly, bi-monthly or monthly journals, or book series editors, may agree to establish other rates or complementary exchanges.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Miscelánea was awarded the Quality Seal for Excellence of scientific journals granted by the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT), a scientific body pertaining to the Spanish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Competitiveness, in 2016 (renewed in the 2025 call, 13/11/2025).

Miscelánea is indexed or abstracted in the following databases and directories:

* ABELL (Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature)
* BEJES (Bibliography of European Journals for English Studies), published by the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE)
* CARHUS Plus+
* DIALNET, Portal de Difusión de la Producción Científica Hispana
* DICE, Difusión y Calidad Editorial de las Revistas Españolas de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas
* Directory of Electronic Journals, Newsletters and Academic Discussion Lists, published by the Association of Research Libraries Washington, DC, USA
* DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals)
* EBSCO Publishing
* ERIH (European Reference Index for the Humanities)
* ERIH Plus
* Index Copernicus International
* ISOC, Revistas de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades del CSIC
* LATINDEX, Sistema Regional de Información en Línea para Revistas Científicas de América Latina, el Caribe, España y Portugal
* Linguistics & Language Behavior Abstracts
* MIAR 2023
* MLA International Biography
* MLA List of Periodicals
* RESH, Revistas Españolas de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas del CSIC
* ROAD Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources
* SCOPUS (Elsevier)
* SJR. Scimago Journal & Country Rank
* ULRICHSWEB

2025 CALIDAD REVISTAS CIENTÍFICAS ESPAÑOLAS
Mención de Buenas Prácticas Editoriales en Igualdad de Género
FECYT-279/2025
Fecha de certificación: 14 de julio de 2016 (5ª edición)
Válido hasta: 19 de diciembre de 2027
(renovado en la convocatoria de 2025 - 13/11/2025)

Página web: <https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/misc>
Cuenta de Twitter: @MiscelaneaUZ
Cuenta de Bluesky: @miscelaneauz.bsky.social

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the colleagues who, without belonging to our Board of Referees, were willing to revise and assess some of the contributions.

1542

Prensas de la Universidad
Universidad Zaragoza

1542

Universidad
Zaragoza