

Agata Tęcza

The profesional versus the amateur : a case study on Spanish female detectives and their role in the masculine and "machista" organizations on the examples of selected texts

Romanica Silesiana 8/1, 162-172

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

AGATA TĘCZA
University of Silesia

The Professional versus the Amateur A Case Study on Spanish Female Detectives and Their Role in the Masculine and *Machista* Organizations on the Examples of Selected Texts

ABSTRACT: In the present work, I wish to concentrate on two examples of detective fiction in Spain, that is on Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel* and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Serpientes en el paraíso*. Both novels are centred on a character of a female detective. After a closer look, we can see that both detectives have found themselves in a similar situation. Julia, the amateur, and Petra, the professional, exist and work in a typically masculine world of detectives and police officers, struggling with the gender issues and roles. By analysing their situations, I wish to present a case study of two female detectives and their reactions, responses and attitudes towards the masculine world of sleuths, thus providing a complete picture of both protagonists.

KEY WORDS: female detective fiction, machismo, Arturo Pérez Reverte, Alicia Giménez Bartlett, Petra Delicado.

Gender Problems in Spain

In the history of Spanish literary research, gender and queer theories are relatively new concepts. Many researchers consider the year 1975 as the introduction of gender theory into Spain. That was when the International Women's Year was celebrated. It also coincided with the beginning of Spain's political transition. The universities in Barcelona and Madrid were the first ones to organize a Seminar on Female Studies (both Universities organized it in 1979). However, the most significant change came in 1982, when the University of Barcelona established the Centre d'Investigació Històrica de la Dona (CHID, Centre

for Research on Women's History). In the book titled *Los estudios de las mujeres en las Universidades españolas 1975—91* we find a significant quote explaining the sudden popularity of gender theory and research among Spanish scholars: "Everybody responded to the same need: to open a space for transforming the knowledge about women [...]. The space for transforming the university and the society" (BALLARÍN DOMINGO 23).

When looking for the reasons why feminism started blooming so late in Spanish culture, it is important to mention the deeply-rooted traditions of patriarchal society and, even more so, the fact that during Franco's regime, both the dictator and the Catholic Church promoted "traditional" and "proper" role of women. The key concept here would be that of "dependency." A woman was supposed to be subordinate, inferior to her man/husband. As we read in Christine Ward Gailey's article "Evolutionary Perspectives on Gender Hierarchy":

subordination may involve the need for women to marry in order to survive, coupled with two other conditions: the role of wife must be inferior in authority to the role of husband, and other adult gender role pairs important for subsistence in which the woman has effective authority [...] must be ineffectual.

WARD GAILEY 38

A great example of this subordination of Spanish women during Franco's regime can be found in Carmen Martín Gaité book titled *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española*, where the author quotes an American observer from the 1940s and his thoughts on the situation of women:

The position of a Spanish woman resembles one in the Middle Ages. Franco limited the civil rights and a Spanish woman cannot have any property; even after the death of her husband, she cannot inherit anything, as the inheritance passes to the sons or to the closest male relative. [A woman] cannot go to public places in the company of a man, if he is not her husband, and afterwards, after getting married, her husband goes out with her very rarely. She cannot hold any public functions and, although I do not know if there is a law against it, so far I have not seen any Spanish woman driving a car.

MARTIN GAÍTE 30 (translation AT)

In Franco's Spain, a woman was supposed to get married and stay at home, whereas unmarried women were deemed failures. In that aspect, Spain resembled Victorian England (and other traditional and patriarchal societies). However, the patriarchal aspect of Spanish society is still present, even in the 21st century. Although Spanish women are allowed to drive and work, and being a single woman is not equivalent to being a failure, the mentality of the society is very much patriarchal. Machismo is a strong concept in Spain, and is very often related to violence against women.

Thus, Spanish feminists fight not only for equal rights and possibilities; they also fight against the traditional outlook on life and gender roles. This is especially visible in the contemporary Spanish narrative. As we read in Magda Potok's *El Malestar. La narrativa de mujeres en la España contemporánea*:

The collective picture of contemporary literature written by women in Spain indicates strong rooting of writers in the tradition of patriarchal culture, determining for 'the second sex' dreams about beauty, fulfilment and love which are difficult to realize, frustrating standards of beauty and demanding social roles. Female figures created by this prose are submitted to the influence of many contradictory powers and tensions: the need of their autonomy is suppressed by the social norm (Law of the Father), but also by the internal imperative of submission and renouncement, deeply manifested in the process of socialization. A woman emerging from the pages of this literature is by no means a beneficiary of the social projects aiming at equality, but a person who is deeply disenchanted, unfulfilled and tormented by the incessant effort directed at achieving goals [...], which appear to be impossible to achieve.

POTOK 425

Detective Fiction and Its Characteristics

Detective fiction is, by definition, a subgenre of crime fiction and mystery fiction, in which the main protagonist is a detective (or a private investigator) working on a case in order to find the murderer. The first modern detective story is generally said to be *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1841. However, the popularity of detective fiction started increasing when in 1887, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the world to the greatest detective of all times, Sherlock Holmes. In his four novels and 56 short stories, Conan Doyle created the character of the most well-known fictional detective of all. What followed was the so-called Golden Age of Detective Fiction (spanning between 1920 and 1939). During that period, Agatha Christie introduced Hercule Poirot, Margery Allingham gave us Albert Campion and Dorothy L. Sayers created Lord Peter Wimsey. It also changed the setting of the novels — the detectives moved from cities to country houses, trains, ships and, ultimately, sleepy English villages (as personified in Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* series).

While talking about detective fiction and its characteristics, it is also important to mention the female detective fiction as a subtype of the main genre. As we read in Amanda C. SEAMAN's *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan*, the first fictional British female detective can be found in 1864 novel *The Female Detective* by James Redding Ware. It seems

that the concept of a female sleuth has been present since the beginnings of the genre; however, the majority of female detectives in fiction are private detectives. Because of that, the most common characteristic of female detective fiction is that of a private detective agency, the lack of procedural aspect of cases and, very often, humour and parody. As Seaman claims: "The appearance of the female police detective thus can be seen as a straightforward register of changes in women's positions in society, reflecting the mechanics of women's entry not just into the workplace but into the professional managerial positions that became available to them during the 1980s" (61). As we can see, the shift in female detective fiction directly reflects the tendencies in the society and mentality of people. However, the percentage of female professional detectives versus the amateurs is still disproportionate. In 1999, 39% of detective novels printed in the US and the UK featured a female private investigator, whereas only 17.5% were about a female police detective (see SEAMAN 61—63). The situation outside English-speaking world is even rarer, especially in traditional, patriarchal societies, such as Japan or China.

In Spain, detective fiction is one of the most popular and prolific literary sub-genres. The first example of detective fiction appeared in Spanish literature few years before Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, in 1838. Although there never was a Spanish fictional detective as famous and beloved as Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Spanish writers introduced us to many interesting detectives, the most popular being Pepe Carvalho, the hero of 22 novels written by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. In 1990, Spanish detective fiction is associated mainly with two important names: Lorenzo Silva, a writer from Madrid creating a series of novels about two Guardia Civil officials and their detective work, and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's series of novels about Petra Delicado, a female police detective. The best example of how popular detective fiction is in Spain is the fact that Arturo Pérez Reverte, one of the most influential and popular contemporary Spanish historical fiction writers, also decided to write detective novels, e.g. *The Dumas Club* or *The Flanders Panel*.

It is also important to mention the position of female detective fiction in Spain. As I explained above, female detective fiction began more or less at the same time as its male counterpart. However, it still remains less popular. According to Shelly GODSTAND, this particular type of detective fiction provides a perfect literary example of the shift from feminist awareness to postfeminist economy, "for a number of reasons, foremost among which is the portrayal of the female detective or criminal herself" (85). This manifests itself in the change of the portrayal of the detective — she stops being a solitary figure and becomes "an aspiring member of the very institution responsible for her victimization" (84).

In this article, I wish to concentrate on two great examples of detective fiction in Spain, that is on Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel* and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Serpientes en el paraíso*. Both of the novels are focused on

female detectives. Pérez Reverte introduces us to Julia, a young art restorer and evaluator from Madrid, as she tries to find two murderers — one from the past, and the other working in the present. Alicia Giménez Bartlett's book focuses on the professional detective, Petra Delicado, as she struggles to find the murderer of a young lawyer. Seemingly, those two books are very different. However, after a closer look, we can see that the detectives have found themselves in a similar situation. Both Julia and Petra are working in a typically masculine world of detectives and police officers, struggling with the gender issues and roles. By analysing Julia and Petra, I wish to present a case study of two female detectives and their reactions, responses and attitudes towards the masculine world of sleuths, thus providing a complete picture of both protagonists.

The Professional

Petra Delicado is an interesting character. She is the heroine of the longest-running series of novels about a female detective in Spain. It is a phenomenon in Spanish literature, as the usual practice is for authors to only publish one novel centred on the same protagonist. Between 1996 and 2013, Alicia Giménez-Bartlett, the creator of Petra Delicado, wrote nine novels focusing on Petra and her work. Delicado is an important character in Spanish literature mainly because of the evolution she undergoes in the novels. What changes is not only Petra's detective skills, but also her relationships and her approach to her position as a female detective.

When we get to know Petra, she is an inspector already, but she is working in the Evidence and Documentation Department in the police station. She is isolated there, both from her male colleagues and true cases — she is doing menial jobs and is responsible mainly for completing paperwork. Her commanding officer, Coronas, keeps her away from any real cases until every other detective is overly occupied. From time to time, Petra can participate and use her detection skills, for example while interviewing witnesses or interrogating suspects. During one of her first interrogations, a young offender calls her a “doll” throughout the interview (GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, *Ritos*, 10).

The reason why Petra does not approach Coronas asking for a different type of job and a chance to prove herself, is simple — she strongly believes that her time will come, that she will have her chance to shine. She is not a warring feminist. What is more, she does not consider herself a feminist at all. Even though Petra very often expresses strong opinions on gender roles, discrimination and traditional approach towards women, she bluntly denies being a feminist (*Muer-tos de papel, Serpientes en el paraíso*).

In my analysis of Petra's character and her role in masculine and *machista* organization, I would like to focus on *Serpientes en el paraíso* (2002). In this novel, Petra investigates a murder in one of the most modern neighbourhoods in Barcelona, El Paradís. During a casual get-together of three young wealthy couples, one person is murdered — Juan Luis Espinet, a wealthy lawyer. The victim had a perfect life — a successful career, a beautiful wife and two lovely children, an ideal house and a close-knit group of friends. There was no history of illegal activity or dodgy business contacts of Juan Luis, his death was not an accident, he was not a victim of a robbery. Petra finds herself in a very difficult situation, because of the lack of suspects and lack of motive. I have selected this particular novel of the series mainly because of the characteristics of the case Petra investigates. In *Serpientes en el paraíso* Petra faces the life she has never had — an idyllic family life, happy marriage and children. This novel can be considered the one where Petra comes to accept her life and job. She begins to accept herself and stops striving for the unattainable.

In *Serpientes en el paraíso*, it seems that Petra is treated equally by her colleagues. It is not her first case, she is not considered a rookie, she is the leading officer during this investigation. However, if we examine her relationship with her team, we can notice a double standard in their behaviour. Overall, Petra is considered to be a part of the team, she is seen as “gender neutral,” identified firstly as an officer, and secondly as a woman. But if we take a closer look, we can notice that Petra is very often seen primarily as a woman. At the very beginning of the investigation, when the team must jump into the swimming pool in order to help to remove the body, the police officers are very apologetic towards Petra (as they have to undress in order to jump into the pool). Another example is Judge García Mouriños, who constantly asks Petra to become his wife, or go out with him. Even though he does that as a joke, it still is an example of objectifying Petra and not considering her an equal. During the course of the investigation Petra is also called to take part in the autopsy of the victim, due to the fact that the forensic medical examiner thinks that Petra does not trust him (and wants to challenge her, seeing how much impact the body of the victim would have on her).

Throughout the novels, Petra must fight the ever-present machismo attitude of her colleagues. For example, many of her decisions are questioned. She is introduced as an “intellectual treasure” of the police (GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, *Ritos*, 13); she is often laughed at due to her affection for high culture and foreign languages. In *Serpientes en el paraíso*, Petra must face a completely different problem at work — her longing for the unattainable, the life she has never had. It is actually the most prominent aspect of the novel. Petra not only questions her life and choices, but sometimes also her sanity. Firstly, after meeting three couples that are connected to the victim, Petra begins thinking that family is what she lacks. She feels nostalgic for a happy life of a married woman, begins

longing for children (GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, *Serpientes*, 39). She admits her feelings to her partner, Fermín Garzón, but he actually laughs at her, commenting that such longing is the last thing he would expect her to feel. This comment, again, can be seen as an example of her co-workers' seeing Petra as yet another police officer, and not a woman. Digging deeper, Petra reminds Fermín that she is a woman and might also have maternal instinct. The detective, however, rejects this possibility with a flippant comment: "I thought that at least you wouldn't think about such bullshit" (39). This comment is also the beginning of a series of jokes and teases aimed at Petra, after Garzón sees her hugging a little girl. Garzón's jokes are justified — in previous books, Petra rejected traditionally defined femininity, she criticized it and expressed her dissatisfaction with women and their weaknesses. In *Serpientes en el paraíso*, Petra realizes that femininity has a different side to it — she gets to know influential and wealthy women associated with the victim. Thanks to that, Petra notices that one can have a family without giving up her hobbies, can be wealthy and successful and enjoy their life. She even comments: "We entered this exclusive club only for women and I realized that being a woman is not connected only with insults and pain" (82, translation AT). Petra becomes fascinated with these women, with their lives. I would like to point out that this fascination is also Petra's biggest failure up to date — because of it, she fails to notice the most important evidence in the case, to apprehend the perpetrator, and she prolongs the investigation. She also jeopardises her career in the police force — feeling the need to compensate for her feminine behaviour, Petra asks Fermín to take part in a bar fight with her (and thus, the two of them cause a drunken brawl that could have cost them their careers).

Petra is a character that evolves throughout the series. Her strong work ethics and her no-nonsense attitude gain her the trust of her co-workers. She stops being seen as the only female on the job and starts being taken seriously. *Serpientes en el paraíso*, however, is her turning point. She struggles with life, with her past and future. She sees herself as a failure, a sad woman with no romantic ties. She wallows in regret and solitude, thinking of how her future will look. However, she focuses on her job, pulls herself together and accepts her life as it is. Thanks to this, she overcomes her self-doubt and regains her motivation and success.

The Amateur

Julia, the main protagonist of Pérez Reverte's novel, presents a completely different approach to life and femininity. She is a detective, an amateur one.

She works on a case concerning a Renaissance painting, and tries to uncover the murderer and answer the question she finds written on the painting — Who killed the knight? However, due to her young age and lack of experience, she enlists a mentor, an old antiquarian, César. He is the one leading Julia through her case. It is César who influences Julia and her decisions; it is he, who gives her advice and shelter in difficult times. Throughout the case, we observe as Julia becomes completely dependent on César, sharing all her thoughts on the case with him. Although at times she manifests strong independence and is very calm and collected in the face of danger, César can be seen as her main weakness.

At the beginning of the novel, Julia presents herself as a pretty independent person. She approaches the mystery of the painting with calm and curiosity. At that point, César is her partner, she needs him to share her ideas and voice her concerns to him. However, in comparison with Petra and her attitude, Julia must be identified as a weak person. Her relationship with César is not based on partnership and equality. She is, at times, the weak damsel-in-distress type of a girl that needs to be rescued. She surrounds herself with men who are there to help in the investigation. And although she is the one responsible for conducting the investigation, she turns to her “sidekicks” not only for advice but also for help and support. It seems that Julia’s actions are all related to her previous conversations with her helpers or their comments.

Julia is, however, more aware of her femininity than Petra Delicado. She does not think of herself as a “gender-neutral” person. She always presents herself as a woman. She allows herself to wallow in grief after the death of her lover. Julia is very often objectified. Throughout the novel, she is called “Princess,” “Little Girl,” “Luv.” She never objects to those terms of endearment, she never asks not to be treated like a child pretending to be an adult.

She is not as strong as Petra Delicado. Julia becomes lost in the world of machismo and testosterone. She lets herself be guided by her instinct and her feelings. She trusts people easily, never analysing their motives or questioning their intentions. Even though both she and Petra are struggling with typically female emotions and doubts, Julia never emerges stronger from her experience. Even after solving the mystery of the painting and finding the murderer, she allows herself to day-dream. In the course of the investigation of the painting, Julia becomes the centre of another case — a murderer is killing people connected to her or the case. The whole aim of this killing spree is to teach Julia independence and change her. Unfortunately, at the end of the story we find Julia just as we got to know her — a weak person, in need of a guide.

Julia is an amateur detective operating in an almost-completely masculine world of detectives and private investigators. However, despite her chance to shine and emerge as an independent female, she commits the biggest sin of a Spanish girl — she lets herself be dependent on men. She is a weak person who, from time to time, shows her independence. Those moments are very

scarce, though. Maybe it is because of Julia's young age or her family issues, but she never comes of age throughout the novel. She faces many dangers but she never learns from her mistakes. That is, in my opinion, the biggest failure of Julia as an amateur sleuth. She does not see the bigger picture of the case, she focuses only on small details, and lets herself be led by others. She never tries to investigate the case on her own, never trying to free herself from the masculinity surrounding her.

The Professional versus the Amateur

In Franco's Spain woman was seen as an object, a weak being that should only be interested in finding a husband and having children. This image changed a great deal, but Spanish women still struggle with machismo attitude and professions that are considered "traditionally female." By analysing Alicia Giménez Bartlett's character of Petra Delicado, and contrasting it with Arturo Perez Reverte's character of Julia, we can observe two different approaches to gender issues that can arise in a typically masculine world.

Petra Delicado is a successful, independent detective. Although she began her career as a secretary, she successfully developed herself and transformed her career. She is a respected detective, the lead investigator, and accepts her life the way it is. Petra proves it to people that they should not judge her based on appearances. She makes them see past her gender, and notice her traits and dedication to her work. Petra's amateur counterpart, however, is less successful in freeing herself from the limitations of her gender. Julia accepts her role in the society, she is humble and does not get angry when people see her just as a pretty face. She even allows herself to become a pawn in a game of two great minds — the murderer and Julia's helper, the chess player. Very rarely does she try to take the initiative in her investigation, as she tends to rely on her male companions. Julia seems to be stuck in Franco's times, or times right after the beginning of the cultural change in Spain.

The confrontation between Petra Delicado, the professional detective, and Julia, the amateur detective, cannot be more one-sided. Petra should be seen as a symbol of Spanish postfeminism. She is an independent woman successfully working in a *machista* organization. She is seen for her merits and not for her gender. Julia, however, fails to develop herself and gain her independence. What is also visible is the fact that Pérez Reverte does not focus on Julia's development. Whereas Bartlett addresses the issue of the place of a woman within a *machista* organization, points out the problems and difficulties Petra faces, Pérez Reverte creates the main protagonist that completely lacks a backbone. His sleuth is but

a pawn, she is a typical damsel-in-distress. For Perez Reverte, the plot of the case is more important than the creation of a believable heroine. Bartlett's character emerges as a strong role-model and a great example for contemporary Spanish women. Pérez Reverte allows his readers to focus on the suspense and plot, failing to produce a likeable character that could gain his readers' sympathy. Thus, studying both novels, we can see the different approach to feminist issues. The professional detective deals with her job, tries to find her place within the organization and fight against machismo. The amateur is the one who does not focus on such trivial issues as feminism, allowing herself to be led by men and focusing on the case.

Bibliography

- BALLARÍN DOMINGO, Pilar, GALLEGRO MÉNDEZ, M. Teresa, and MARTÍNEZ BENLLOCH, Isabel, 1995: *Los estudios de las mujeres en las Universidades españolas 1975—91. Libro blanco*. Madrid: Insituto de la Mujer.
- BROOKSBANK JONES, Amy, 1997: *Women in Contemporary Spain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- BUTLER, Judith, 1999: *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, Alicia: *Día de perros*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2003.
- GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, Alicia: *Mensajeros de la oscuridad*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2005.
- GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, Alicia: *Ritos de muerte*. Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1996.
- GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT, Alicia: *Serpientes en el paraíso*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2002.
- GODSTAND, Shelly, 2002: "From Feminism to Postfeminim in Women's Detective Fiction from Spain: The Case of Maria-Antónina Oliver and Alicia Giménez Bartlett." *Letras Femininas*, 28. 1: 85—99.
- MARTÍN GAÍTE, Carmen, 1987: *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama.
- PÉREZ REVERTE, Arturo, 2009: *Szachownica Flamandzka*. Warszawa: Muza S.A.
- POTOK, Magda, 2010: *El Malestar. La narrative de mujeres en la España contemporánea*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- SEAMAN, Amanda C., 2004: *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan*. Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan, 1977: *The Poetics of Prose*. Michigan: Cornell University Press.
- WARD GAILEY, Christine, 1987: "Evolutionary Perspective on Gender History." In: *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research*. Eds. Beth HESS and Myra MARX FERREE. California: Sage, 32—67.

Bio-bibliographical note

Agata Tęcza is a graduate in Spanish Language and English Philology at the University of Silesia in Katowice. In 2010 she began her PhD studies as a doctoral student in literary theory at the same university. In her research she focuses mainly on the narration and its issues in postmodern novels, the phenomenon of intertextuality, hypertext and ekphrasis in contemporary literature as well as new tendencies in children and young adult fiction. She researches cultural and literary aspects that are common for English- and Spanish-speaking countries. In addition, she works on the problem of untranslatability and translation of cultural elements, puns and word plays.