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## FROM FEMINISM TO POST-FEMINISM: ACTS OF VIOLENCE IN ALICIA GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT'S *RITOS DE MUERTE* (1996)

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The Petra Delicado series, written by Alicia Giménez Bartlett, now consists of eight novels, the first of which, *Ritos de muerte* (1996), incorporates the topic of violence against women as its central theme. This concept is present during the novel's entirety as Detective Delicado investigates the cases assigned to her. The novel follows the framework of a series of mysterious crimes against a series of women that requires the work of the professional police detective and her male partner.

The Spanish detective genre surfaced during Franco's dictatorship, and it was the same dictatorship that impeded the growth of this genre because of its controversial ideas that criticized the governmental system. However, it was not until after the dictatorship that the detective genre flourished in Spain. Kathleen Thompson-Casado states that "in Spain detective fiction in general has been and continues to be a very popular genre" (137). Giménez-Bartlett uses this genre to investigate the reality of gender violence in relationship to women's victimization and lack of/fight for agency in Spain. Although other critics, such as Nina Molinaro, have discussed issues of rape and female victimization in *Ritos de muerte*, this article analyzes the use of the detective genre as a

means to view questions of violence against women through both feminist and post-feminist view points. The difficulty in this novel arises from both the genre and the gender of the writer and protagonist. When a female author writes in a traditionally male genre, detective fiction, using a female detective, we expect to find a subversive text, one that questions patriarchal constructs. In *Ritos de muerte*, however, we find all of the trappings of a potential radical change in a story line that reinforces patriarchy through the auspices of female agency. First, the article examines changes stemming from the move from a feminist to a post-feminist viewpoint in literary theory. Second, the article views the detective genre and its possibility for subversive female agency. Finally, through the analysis of the novel, we suggest that the novel, even with its possibilities, reinforces traditional patriarchal gender tendencies.

Violence against women is a reality that has existed for centuries but only recently has become openly discussed. Literary portrayals of women as victims of violence abound, especially in crime fiction. In Spain, recent laws have worked towards a more ample definition of what constitutes violence against women, and what constitutes rape. As reports of violence against women continue to rise, and in an effort to reduce gender violence in Spain, the Spanish government unanimously introduced the “Ley Orgánica 1/2004, de 28 de diciembre, de medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género.” The definition of gender violence as established by the law states that gender violence “comprende todo acto de violencia física y psicológica, incluidas las agresiones a la libertad sexual, las amenazas, las coacciones o la privación arbitraria de libertad” (“Ley Orgánica”). The primary objective of this law is “actuar contra la violencia que, como la manifestación de la discriminación, la situación de desigualdad y las relaciones de poder de los hombres sobre las mujeres, se ejerce” (“Ley Orgánica”) upon women by known men, for example

their partners. The “Ley Orgánica 1/2004” institutes measures to “prevenir, sancionar, y erradicar esta violencia y prestar asistencia a sus víctimas” (“Ley Orgánica”). This demonstrates the achievements that have resulted from the Spanish feminist fight that searches simultaneously for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The number of crimes of abuse, harassment and sexual aggression has increased during the last ten years in Spain. The statistics presented by the Instituto de la Mujer shows that the reported crimes of this type were 5,647 in 1997 and 7,207 in 2005.<sup>1</sup> These numbers represent the total of sexual abuses, sexual abuses with penetration, sexual harassment, sexual aggressions and sexual aggressions with penetration. The statistics for the years in between portray a gradual increase in the number of reported crimes. By analyzing the statistical data of the crimes of abuse, harassment and sexual aggression, we can conclude two theories: more Spanish women have overcome their fears and have reported the crimes committed against them or the number of abused women has increased in the recent years as the study conducted by the Instituto de la Mujer indicates. The two theories presented are both valid, but by adapting the influence of feminism it is more probable that the incidence of women who report violent crimes has increased.

According to the “Ley orgánica 1/2004,” “La violencia de género no es un problema que afecte el ámbito privado. Al contrario, se manifiesta como el símbolo más brutal de la desigualdad existente en nuestra sociedad.” Although Spanish society recognizes the widespread influence of gendered violence, its appearance as entertainment still exists in literature today. Rape, especially, is commodified and used as a subject of lurid interest in literature and film. Molinaro states that, “Too often literary representations of rape have reinforced the event as natural and inevitable, the result of normative social and sexual conventions”

and that rape is seen as “an allegory for the imagined demand for patriarchal power” (104). She also explains that *Ritos de muerte* does not “privilege the voices of victimized women” but it does “underscore the conflict between gendered agency and gendered victimization, and the gender conflict between justice and revenge” (104). These conflicts between agency and victimization are at the forefront of the differences between feminism and postfeminism.

Shelley Godsland, when analyzing the works of Giménez-Bartlett, uses Ann Brooks’ definition of popular post-feminism, which refers to an idea of women’s rejection of feminist tenets and movement into more traditional gender roles, such as working in the domestic sphere, post-feminism as a media product, and the importance of power and beauty (86, 88, 89). As with feminism, however, post-feminism does not have only one definition that is concrete and simple to understand. Plenty of debate exists in regards to post-feminism, but generally post-feminism “tends to crystallize issues of victimization, autonomy and responsibility” and “is critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives” (Gamble 43–44). For the purpose of this argument we use the theoretical construct of post-feminism as “the continuation of the originating term’s aims and ideologies, albeit on a different level” (45). In this aspect of feminist thought, feminism works to rid women of feeling guilt about their position as victims of crime, whereas post-feminism attempts to change the image of women as only victims.

Post-feminist critic Katie Roiphe, in her controversial book on rape, characterizes rape as “a natural trump card for feminism. Arguments about rape can be used to sequester feminism in the teary province of trauma and crisis [...]. By blocking analysis with its claims to unique pandemic suffering, the rape crisis becomes a powerful source of authority” (56–57). From this characterization we can conclude that the woman does not accept her persecution and uses her state of empowerment to gain authority instead of



suffering from victimization. Nancy Vosburg explains that in this novel “rape is constructed [...] as a pathological deviance brought on by a domineering mother, a construction that a second-wave feminist [...] would reject” (25). Vosburg claims that Petra “is always on the look-out for sexist challenges to her own authority and autonomy in the police department, but the deployment of feminist arguments is more often than not self-serving” (25). The novel, then, although dealing with issues that are of top concern to feminists, belittles the importance of these issues through its plot-driven twists that result in an ending that negates female agency.

In order to explain the complexity of violence against women and its effects on society, Giménez Bartlett uses the detective genre for two purposes: one of them is to entertain the reader, and the second one is to educate her audience about violence against women. The Spanish detective novel follows the example of the American detective novel known as “hard-boiled.” The “hard-boiled” novel is characterized by its violence and graphic sexual description. Kathleen Thompson-Casado concludes that

What Spanish writers found most attractive in the hard-boiled writers [...] was the model of the hard-boiled detective who is a cynical, marginalized, tough-guy who, in the process of investigating a “crime,” is really investigating the “truth of American reality, exposing moral, social, and political corruption of individuals and, most importantly, institutions.”(136–37)

In *Ritos de muerte* we can perceive Giménez Bartlett’s critique of the judicial system and the society in which it is found as they both are confronted with the topic of gender violence.

By employing the detective genre, Alicia Giménez Bartlett provides a new perspective on the topic of violence against women. According to Maureen Reddy, in her book *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, women who write in previously

male fictional genres, such as crime fiction, have started a countertradition by introducing feminist ideas and female main characters (2). She explains that this countertradition

shares with feminist work in other genres an essential subversiveness, with women writers borrowing familiar features of detective fiction in order to turn them upside down and inside out, exposing the genre's fundamental conservatism and challenging the reader to rethink his/her assumptions. (2)

Reddy defines feminism as

a way of looking at the world that places women's experiences at the center. It sees women as capable of intelligence, moral reasoning, and independent action, while also giving attention to multivarious social, legal, and psychological limitations placed on women by the patriarchal societies in which most live. (9)

Giménez Bartlett uses a female detective as a reader of clues, and Reddy suggests that women read the world differently than men do, therefore proposing that women detectives solve crimes by seeing clues differently.

Linda Mizejewski, in *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, sees the subversive aspect of the female detective in that, while women are now a part of the system, they are still seen as outsiders since they are part of the minority (9); the stories negate the idea that the only stories for women are those with romance and marriage (12); and the heroine is defined by her work and not by her looks (19). When discussing Spanish detective fiction, Nancy Vosburg asserts that this genre when written by women calls "attention to women's autonomy and agency in society, and [...] bring[s] to the forefront the sexual

politics that define the postmodern era” (23). By analyzing the events that occur before as well as during the investigation conducted by Inspector Delicado and Deputy Inspector Garzón, this article traces the transformation of woman’s role in violent crimes, from victim to predator.

The topic of justice and revenge as gender conflicts stands out in this novel, as the first murderer, Juan, is replaced by his fiancée Luisa, who kills Juan and then rapes and kills another victim in order to prove Juan’s innocence. Here we see the entrance of post-feminism in the novel. In post-feminism the woman is no longer only the victim of violence, but her role doubles as that of the victim and the victimizer. This change in the role of the woman in society is portrayed in Alicia Giménez Bartlett’s novel. Giménez-Bartlett uses the genre of the detective novel to manipulate the concept of violence against women to entertain and educate the reader.

Like other writers of the detective genre, Giménez Bartlett criticizes society as well as the Spanish institutions. In *Ritos de muerte*, the criticism of the police department is extremely evident. While analyzing the evidence related to the suspects of Juan’s murder, Garzón describes the public image of the police as “una organización lenta, institucional y pesada” (179). This image of the police department as slow is reiterated through Petra because she is not a professional detective although she works at the police station. Petra and Garzón are quite slow during their investigation of the rapes. Their lack of experience impedes them from solving the case before the aggressor rapes more women.

Another example of Giménez Bartlett’s criticism in *Ritos de muerte* occurs when the director of the television program, Ana Lozano, complains to Petra about her lack of cooperation when she says, “Usted no está hecha de mejor pasta que los demás. Todos los policías colaboran con nosotros: inspectores, subordinados, incluso sus propios supervisores” (123). During the



investigation Petra tries not to provide the media with any information in order to protect the victims and maintain confidentiality with the goal of not causing more difficulties. The impression Petra has about journalists can be derived from Petra's following thought: "La opinión pública. Aquello era lo que obtenían los malditos periodistas manteniendo informada a la opinión pública: entorpecer el trabajo y tocar las narices" (135). Petra maintains a negative impression about the relationship between the police and the journalists. After she solves the case, Petra says, "he estado negándome a colaborar todo el tiempo por una cuestión de principios, y ahora que el asunto está resuelto me lanzo al estrellato. No, no quiero que nadie piense que busco el aplauso" (254). Petra does not need to feel famous in order to be satisfied with her work. During the entire novel, Petra is firm about not communicating with media, demonstrating her determination to solve the case and maintain the investigation as private as possible.

The elements of the detective novel are mechanisms for presenting complicated and controversial ideas. The detective genre serves to create a transition between two different but related theories, such as Godsland suggests when stating that "Crime fiction provides an ideal literary medium for the articulation of the shift from a feminist consciousness to a post-feminist economy for a number of reasons, foremost among which is the portrayal of the detective or criminal herself" (85). In order to create this transition that Godsland explains, Giménez Bartlett uses the steps of an investigation during two occasions. First, Petra and Garzón, inexperienced in detective cases, collect the evidence after following the clues left by the rapist, analyze it, and then identify the primary suspect of the rapes: Juan Jardiel. The second occasion in which Petra and Garzón use the steps of an investigation is when they try to find the assassin of the rapist. Petra and Garzón dedicate the majority of their time in interrogating the rape victims and those close to Juan with the goal of finding the assassin. Petra describes

one of the occasions in which Garzón visits her house to analyze the information they have gathered about the case as the following: “preparé un litro de café y nos pusimos al trabajo. Coloqué el pizarrín sobre la estantería y, a modo indicativo, escribí en la parte superior: «Caso Jardiel» y debajo: «Primera posibilidad»” (178). These two distinct but related investigations—the rape/marking of the first victims and the subsequent death of the suspect followed by the rape of another woman—reflect two completely different concepts about violence against women. The mystery around Juan’s murder acts like a bridge, connecting the two aspects of violence against women. The transition between the two themes is smooth, diminishing the traumatic effects upon the reader. The detective genre allows for a more complete understanding of the novel’s argument.

The first example of violence against women that appears in *Ritos de muerte* is male violence against women, the aggression committed by a man towards a woman. In the novel Juan commits three violent acts against each of his victims. Petra summarizes one of them when she says, “Amenazándola con un cuchillo la llevó hasta un solar cercano precariamente vallado. La hizo subir a un cajón de cerveza que sin duda tenía preparado, y saltar al interior. Una vez dentro del descampado, la violó” (36). In this instance Petra is talking about Juan’s second victim although he commits similar crimes against the other three victims. In this example there are two acts, the threat and rape. Juan uses a knife as a weapon to threaten his victim as a means to fulfilling his goal of raping her. We witness the psychological power that a man has when he uses a weapon that empowers him. He intimidates the victim, making her believe that he will kill her if she does not cooperate. Juan takes advantage of the power he has to force his victims into having sexual relations with him. During the novel’s entirety the motives that make Juan rape his victims are unknown, but at the end of the novel we discover that Juan had an undesirable

past. His father abandoned his mother, running away with another woman while forgetting about Juan. One theory that explains the rapes that Juan commits is the resentment Juan has towards women. Petra explains that “según el psiquiatra, Jardiel violaba a las chicas llevado del típico odio no confesado hacia su madre, que se derramaba contra todo el sexo femenino” (253). His mother is very possessive of him and his fiancée, Luisa. She does not allow them to live their own lives. This necessity to control situations has led her to arrange the marriage between Juan and Luisa. As a result of the planned marriage Juan feels a sense of rejection towards Luisa. The internal conflict caused by the women in his life causes Juan to take out his resentment on other women. Petra suggests that his *machista* instinct influences him to exert power over women in other ways, since he lacks that power in his home situation and his relationships with his mother and fiancée.

This desire to show his power and victory over women leads him to mark his victims, Juan’s third violent crime. Petra describes the marking as “algo muy extraño, una herida superficial con una forma curiosa, nada parecido a un rasguño o navajazo. Era en realidad un círculo perfecto hecho por minúsculos alfilerazos, unos junto a otros” (16–17). Juan marks the women with a unique watch that he designed, asking a watchmaker to put thorn-like elements around the watch so that when he marked his victims, the wound would heal to leave a scar in the form of a flower. The act of marking the victims has a profound meaning. Petra expresses this idea when she says “la dichosa marca funcionaba como un símbolo, quizás incluso más infamante que la propia violación” (74). As Petra explains, the marking serves to unify the victims, since all have been raped by the same man. The marking also serves as a reminder of the horrible event that the four women experienced. The four victims have not just been psychologically harmed for the rest of their lives but have also been physically harmed because the physical scar only disappears with cosmetic

surgery. Unfortunately, three of the four victims come from low-income families, making cosmetic surgery impossible. The victim who does come from a wealthy family has the surgery to erase the scars from the rape. For the victim's father, it is essential to eliminate anything that could remind his daughter of the rape. The father does not realize that the emotional effects of a rape are more shocking than the physical scar.

One characteristic of violence against women is the desire to forget the event and erase any evidence or memory of the aggression. In *Ritos de muerte* none of the victims, as they give their statement, wants to provide any details that could lead to the rapist. Juan's victims have no desire to remember any detail about that terrifying event because each one believes that her victimization will devalue her in society, causing a lack of self-worth and a lowered self-esteem. One character has the physical scar removed in order to eliminate any trace of the victimization because "Hay que borrar lo que no gusta, ¿verdad?, como si nunca hubiera pasado" (85). The victims do not wish to have any ties with the aggressor or the event. Sometimes, as we see in this novel, questions of revenge lead women to become aggressors against the men who rape or otherwise violate them.

Female violence against men can exist at various levels. The woman can verbally humiliate the man, rape him and to the extreme kill him. Most common is for a woman to verbally abuse a man because it does not require physical power, but instead mental dominance. The other motive for which a woman can kill a man is revenge. She cannot contemplate that he has betrayed her. It is a matter of honor. In *Ritos de muerte*, family and personal honor encourage Luisa to commit two murders. Petra's theory about the reason for which Luisa commits her crimes is correct:

Así que cuando supiste que Juan era un violador perseguido por la policía te horrorizaste. ¿Cómo había podido hacer una

cosa así? Luego él te llamó desde su escondite y tú decidiste matarlo. Era la única manera de salvar su honor y proteger a tu madre de aquella pesadilla. Quedaste con él por teléfono. Era inútil que te jurara que era inocente. Tú sospechabas en parte su perversión, habías visto a veces pornografía bien escondida en su cuarto, sabías que era raro, que estaba reprimido. Te fue fácil de apuñalarlo, ¿cómo había caído tan bajo? Después le quitaste el reloj de púas y lo sustituiste por uno nuevo que acababas de comprar. Primer paso para demostrar ante la opinión pública que él no era culpable. El segundo fue matar y violar a Salomé, así quedaba alejada de él cualquier sombra de sospecha. (249–50)

By analyzing all the evidence and interrogating all the people related to the investigation, Petra summarizes all the facts about the murders of Juan and Salomé. The reader can construct a detailed image of the crime and of the motive that led Luisa to commit such an undesirable act. When she sees herself surrounded by her adoptive mother's rejection and Petra's conclusion of Juan's murder, Luisa finds herself obligated to confess that she raped Salomé, and referring to the rape she tells Petra, "Después de matarla, sí, con un pomo grande de puerta que compré en una ferretería" (250). The mental image of the rape is extremely graphic not only for the reader but also for Petra who cannot fathom what she is hearing.

The image of a woman as delicate and innocent is destroyed by the immoral acts of the woman herself. In *Ritos de muerte*, the character Hamed says "La mujer es algo excelso y delicado, como una flor" (138). The Muslim image of the woman, similar to that of the rest of the world, has the woman on a pedestal, innocent and incapable of harming anything. She is fragile and smooth like a flower. Although during the novel Juan's victims are the prime suspects of his death, Petra and Garzón can not imagine that a



woman can murder for revenge. Petra asks herself, “¿Cómo una mujer, un ser etéreo, fuera del sustrato oscuro de este mundo, podía ser capaz de asesinar por venganza?” (190). Although Petra arrests Salomé as a suspect of Juan’s murder, Petra always believes in Salomé’s innocence. Petra believes so much in her innocence that Petra uses the money she receives from selling one of her properties to bail Salomé out of jail. The image of the woman as only the victim continues until the end of the investigation. Not until then do Petra and Garzón believe that a woman is capable of murdering a man and a woman.

Gender violence does exist and not only are men the aggressors. Along with recognizing the gender violence problem, society should force itself not to create gender stereotypes in relation to violence because it can be greatly deceiving. The police chief in *Ritos de muerte* reflects that “Descubrir que una mujer comete una violación no es un tema de todos los días (253–54). It was uncommon in 1996 for a woman to commit a crime in Spain, but as the years pass this phenomenon changes into a recurring event. The percentage of women who have been sentenced in Spain has increased in the past years: in 1998 the percentage of women sentenced was 6.55% while in 2005 this percentage increased to 7.85%.<sup>2</sup> Although the percentage change is not very significant, we can see the increase in reported crimes committed by women.

Alicia Giménez Bartlett uses the detective genre to explore violence against women through a feminist as well as post-feminist perspective. As Thompson-Casado explains, “in the hands of Spanish women authors, the re-writing of the detective novel becomes a valuable vehicle for questioning the stereotypes and values of the genre and the dominant culture” (139). Giménez Bartlett, through her novel *Ritos de muerte*, questions the stereotypes of different groups in society: men, women, the police and the media. At the same time she questions gender violence

and morality. Through the detective genre, as we have argued, we can see the link between violence against women through the lens of both feminism and post-feminism.

Giménez Bartlett creates social consciousness about gender violence, focusing on its radical changes that can turn into important social problems. Literature is not only for entertainment, but it also reflects the society of an era. By understanding this we can create changes that better the society in which we live. Understanding and recognizing the problem is as important as solving it. If we understand the problem, we can try to prevent it in the future. Gender violence has not been easy to comprehend because of the abstract motives that cause it. Through her novel about violent crimes against women, Alicia Giménez Bartlett begins to bring these issues to the forefront, allowing for discussion to occur about the causes and effects of gender-based violence.

However, even though the novel highlights the increasing problem of violence against women, it also portrays women as both victim and victimizer. The novel ends with Petra discovering Luisa's guilt in the murder of Juan and the last victim; therefore, instead of focusing on the very real problem of violent crimes against women, the text trivializes the subject by introducing a plot twist in which a woman commits an even worse crime than her male counterpart, murdering two people and raping one of them. Even if, as Thompson-Casado stated above the Spanish female-authored detective novel as a "valuable vehicle for questioning the stereotypes and values of the genre and the dominant culture" (139), this novel disappoints in its lack of subversiveness, it does instead reinforce the patriarchy through the guise of female agency both on the part of the author, the protagonist, and the final guilty party.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The statistics are from El Instituto de la Mujer and do not include data for the Basque Country, Girona, or Lleida. Refer to “Delitos Conocidos de Abuso, Acoso y Agresión Sexual” at <[www.mtas.es/mujer](http://www.mtas.es/mujer)>.

<sup>2</sup>The percentages are calculated over the number of crimes in which the gender of the guilty is known. Refer to “Personas Condenadas según tipo de Delito” at <[www.mtas.es/mujer](http://www.mtas.es/mujer)>.

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