

**PATRIARCHY, INDOCTRINATION AND EDUCATION. THE  
THERAPEUTIC POWER OF CREATION IN WOMEN'S  
LITERATURE.**

**TWO CASE STUDIES: CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE'S *THE  
BACK ROOM* (1978) AND IAN McEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*  
(2001)**



*Sección Femenina, Jaén, 1970. Photo by M<sup>a</sup> Luisa Lara Rueda*

Antonia García Lara  
Máster en Literatura y Lingüística Inglesas (2010/2011)  
Supervisor: Adelina Sánchez Espinosa  
Universidad de Granada

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“Where do I begin? How do I describe a process that is so personal, so intimate, so haphazard? How do I describe the need I had to sit in silence, open my notebook, and begin day after day, not knowing what might appear? How do I describe the initial trepidation, the times of quiet when no words came, the hours when words flowed like a rushing river that nothing could keep within its banks? How do I describe the mysterious alchemy that transmutes our personal grief, anger, and incomprehension into a spaciousness of heart and mind?” (Susan Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul: Transforming Grief and Loss Through Writing*, 2002: 21).

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## INTRODUCTION

“The word is both a sword and a shield: it can both inflict and protect against the pain of a wounding”  
(Harris, 2003: 252)

The statement above gives a general idea of the power of creation to heal the wounded soul. My dissertation deals with the patriarchal education that indoctrinates women and forces them to be *domestic angels*<sup>1</sup> and how this education provokes a trauma that they try to heal by creation in the form of writing. I will use two case studies to illustrate my point: Carmen Martín Gaité’s C., who is Martín Gaité’s alter ego in *El Cuarto de Atrás* [*The Back Room*] (1978), and Briony Tallis, who is a fictional character in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001). Briony is actually the one who writes *Atonement* in McEwan’s novel.

The reason for choosing the indoctrination of women as the topic for my dissertation has been my curiosity and personal experience as granddaughter and daughter to two wonderful women who received the patriarchal education that deprived them of their autonomy and made them dependant on becoming someone’s wives if they wanted to prosper in life. I am an only child raised by my grandmother Concha, who spent many afternoons telling me stories of her childhood when I was younger. I was shocked when I heard the pain in her voice, but, sadly, she repeated her own story in my mother M<sup>a</sup> Luisa: while my mum was wasting her time embroidering her trousseau, my grandparents believed that her brother had to study at the University. That was the traditional belief: women belonged to their homes. The photograph you can see on the front page depicts my mother in her twenties and many other unmarried women from Jaén attending an afternoon meeting organized by the *Sección Femenina* of this Andalusian province. In these meetings, which lasted for two hours each day, during a month and a half, young women learnt how to pray, how to cook, to sew, or to raise children. A priest, some nuns, and three or four married women acted as instructors.

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<sup>1</sup> In Victorian England (1837-1901), following Coventry Patmore’s theory of the *angel in the house* (*The Angel in the House*, 1854), women were supposed to be *domestic angels*. A domestic angel was a domestic servant, a woman who was supposed to stay at home and perform her duties as the perfect wife and mother.

By researching into texts dealing with the education received by Spanish unmarried women from the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 to Francisco Franco's<sup>2</sup> death in 1975, I have understood the current situation of many old and middle-aged Spanish women whose sole occupation in life is looking after their husbands and children. They are not qualified for other jobs because they were not given the opportunity to receive life-long education and they could not attend University. Women, who were given certain rights during the Second Republic (1931-1936)<sup>3</sup>, lost them after 1939 and the *Sección Femenina*<sup>4</sup> indoctrinated them with a different system of beliefs with the sole aim of making good future Spanish wives and mothers and those who did not follow this assigned role were doomed to have a life full of grief,<sup>5</sup> as we will see when analyzing Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*.

The comparative approach adopted in this dissertation has given me the opportunity also of reaching conclusions on the education given to women in England between 1919 and 1945 (between the end of World War I [1914-1919] and the end of World War II [1939-1945]). Sadly, the situation was not very different because the period after World War I was one of conservatism about sex roles. In short, by the 1928 women in the United Kingdom found themselves with little progress besides the vote because they were encouraged to remain *domestic angels* and were strongly influenced by the reading of romance fiction, which will ruin young Briony's life forever in McEwan's *Atonement*.

The current dissertation is distributed as follows: in the first part of my research, I try to find the connections between patriarchal education, indoctrination and trauma. The deficiencies of a patriarchal education, which indoctrinates women and imposes on them a fixed system of

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<sup>2</sup> Francisco Franco (1892-1975) was the leader of the "National" Army who won the Spanish Civil War in 1939 against the Republicans. He ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Women were given certain rights, among them the right to vote or to divorce.

<sup>4</sup> The *Sección Femenina* was created after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) by Pilar Primo de Rivera. Women were given a patriarchal education to perpetuate their role as wives and mothers. We will discuss this in Section 3.1.1.

<sup>5</sup> Literature and popular songs at that time, such as those songs by Concha Piquer, helped to support this view.

knowledge that oppresses them causes these women a trauma. Regarding the second part, I have explored how this trauma can be healed if it is expressed in words. I have researched on these tenets using two case studies, as I said before, one of them a piece of literature in Spanish, Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* (1978), and the other a piece of literature in English, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). Finally the conclusions find their commonalty and differences in the relation between indoctrination, trauma and the therapeutic power of creation.

## **CHAPTER 1: PATRIARCHY, INDOCTRINATION AND EDUCATION**

Patriarchy, literally defined as ‘the power of the father’, has been used to signify the explicit and implicit subordination of women by the rule of men: “[f]rom the relationships of reproduction and the sexual division of labor in the home develops a whole series of related repressions in which men have colluded historically to deny women public office, legal rights, equal consideration as productive workers, control over their own health and welfare, and the right to define their own sexuality” (Thompson, 1983: 11). As this author illustrates, “[j]ust as capital exploited and appropriated the labor power of waged workers at the point of production, it was argued, so did patriarchy exploit and appropriate the gratuitous labor of women in the home and in the relationships of reproduction” (ibid.). Elaine Showalter defines patriarchy as a system that “has limited female biology to its own narrow specification”, which is a difference in body and, as a consequence, “this difference has been used as a pretext to ‘justify’ full power of one sex over the other” (Showalter, 1981: 188-189). Jane Thompson adds that “all men, whatever their social position, both before capitalism and despite its modification in state socialist societies, exercise this oppression and share a very real interest in ensuring its preservation” (Thompson, 1983: 11) and she warns us against patriarchy and its harmful effects on women:

Within each woman there is knowledge: energy and power which exists but which, because of the rule of men, has frequently been displaced, buried and confused. Patriarchy has kept [women] like a handmaiden to its interests, totally preoccupied with the servicing of its concerns, bereft of [women’s] own identity as [women] become incorporated within its peculiar logic. Patriarchy has rewarded [women] for [women’s] complicity and docility, kept [women] isolated and separate from each other, and has prevented [women] from making the bridges between [women’s] emotional experiences and social conditions which once connected contain the seeds of revolutionary change (Thompson, 1983: 16).

Thus, patriarchy has oppressed women and has deprived them from their rights. Since poor women were exploited in the factories and middle-class women isolated in the home in the Nineteenth century, some of them demanded their rights: “[o]ut of domestic isolation, the extreme control of



middle-class men over their wives and daughters, and the impoverished dependence of unmarried women, came the first movement of feminists” (Thompson, 1983: 27).

First-wave feminism in the United Kingdom and The United States was a period of women’s activity during the Nineteenth century and early Twentieth century focused on the promotion of equal rights for men and women. On the contrary, as mentioned in the introduction, the period after World War I, from 1919 to the end of World War II in 1945, was one of conservatism about sex roles in England. In other countries such as Spain, women were also fighting for their rights at the beginning of the Twentieth century. As we will see in Chapter 3, they were given certain rights during the Second Republic (1931-1936), for instance the right to divorce or to vote and some of them became members of Parliament, such as Clara Campoamor (1888-1972) and Victoria Kent (1898- 1987). However, from 1939 to 1975 (during the Francoist Regime), women lost these rights and institutions such as the *Sección Femenina* instructed them to become *domestic angels* again, as we will see in detail.

According to Jane Thompson, History has been written by men. She believes that women lack the continuity because they have been forced into silence while men have been setting up the system. Thompson states that “the circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backwards in time as far as our records reach” and adds that “[s]o long as men have written the history books and controlled ‘the general currency of thought’ the philosophy and agitation, the poetry and literature, the art and the politics of women have been obliterated from the records” (Thompson, 1983: 20).

Therefore, there is a superior History “about men, by men, for men” (ibid.), “History” with capital letters and there is an inferior history about women, by women, for women, history with small letters, ie., *herstory*<sup>1</sup>. Gilbert and Gubar illustrated in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that the difference of women’s writing lied in its troubled relationship to female identity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Herstory* is history told from a woman's point of view or emphasizing the role of women. Robin Morgan coined the term in her book *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970).

They said that:

the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention –all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her effort at self-creation from those of her male counterpart (Gilber and Gubar, 1979: 50).

Patriarchy reduced women to a definite role: that of procreation. Women were situated “on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body”, while men were situated “on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 4). Therefore, the patriarchal family was the social group within which children first learn their sexual identities and “the behavior which was considered to be appropriate for boys and girls” (Thompson, 1983: 37) and in this way traditional domestic roles are perpetuated. Girls were led to “expect to do different things at different ages, and each progressive phase is one step further along the inevitable female trail through dating, courtship, ‘going steady’ and getting wed –‘a linear career culminating in marriage’” (Thompson, 1983: 42). These were the accepted “unalterable facts of life” (Thompson, 1983: 41). In this patriarchal society, then, women were their husbands’ possessions and marriage meant therefore imposition of the husband’s will over the wife’s.

According to the English Oxford Dictionary, *education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university*. Education, Jane Thompson states, has been “one of the many social systems created and constructed by men to sustain male power” (Thompson, 1983: 30). She adds that, traditionally, “since schools believed that girls’ main priority was to be wives and mothers, young women found themselves equipped materially and psychologically to be wives and mothers” (Thompson, 1993: 39). Schools, then, prepared women for becoming secondary citizens and left them poorly qualified to perform any of the jobs usually conducted by men, such as lawyers, doctors, or politicians.

One of the roles of the school is supposed to be the development of minds from the complexities of the outside world and teachers are considered to be a guide to help young people. These

expectations fail, however, when the instructor tries to put ideas into the students' minds without giving them an opportunity to question those ideas. *Uncritically*, therefore, is the key word when dealing with indoctrination, since authoritative teachers prevent their students from thinking in an autonomous way. What are, then, the main features which distinguish indoctrination from other methods of passing on knowledge? *Indoctrination* originally meant the implanting of *doctrines*, *doctrine* being synonymous with the noun *teaching*. Because of the importance of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, the term *doctrine* came to mean *Christian doctrine*. I.A. Snoock affirms that “[t]he development of democratic notions in politics and their extension to the field of education brought about a split between the two concepts”, since “[i]ndoctrination became associated with totalitarian regimes and the coercive educational methods they were supposed to use” and “[e]ducation became restricted to the humane and rational process of instruction which democratic states were presumed to practice” (Snoock, 1972: 16-17). This author points out that the method of indoctrination is marked by characteristics such as the following:

1. The teacher is authoritarian, allowing little discussion or questioning; the content is drilled or ‘drummed in’ in some way [...].
2. There are threats of some sort which are held over the children [...].
3. Free discussion is not allowed [...] (Snoock, 1973: 22).

If the teacher has himself/herself been indoctrinated, his/her intention will be the same as that of any good educator: “[s]ince he himself believes that his position is completely rational, he will have no fear of arguments and discussion. He will feel as secure as the physics teacher that reason, evidence, and logic are on his side” (Snoock, 1972: 43)<sup>2</sup>. So, an indoctrinated person (in this case, an indoctrinated teacher) cannot consider any other point of view but his or hers.

In 1873, Harvard president Edward Clarke argued against women’s education by claiming that “the blood demanded by the brain would prevent the reproductive system from developing properly” and

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<sup>2</sup> A clear example is Pilar Primo de Rivera, an indoctrinated indoctrinator who deluded herself that she was committed to the Spanish women’s education with the *Sección Femenina* in Francoist Spain.

suggested that “if unfortunate women did try to participate in higher education, collapse from nervous exhaustion was a possible, even likely, outcome” (Briggs, 2000: 246). At the same time, Darwinian psychiatrists also believed that the education of women “would destroy the grace and charm of social life, and would disqualify women from their true vocation, the nurture of the coming race and the government of well-ordered, healthy and happy homes” (Thompson, 1973: 32). The theories of British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) maintained that the demands of intellectual work were incompatible with physiological change. Thus, he believed that it was better for women to use their energy in a particular direction, that of procreation.

These ideas were reintroduced in England after World War I and in Spain after 1939, as we will see reflected in the two case studies analyzed in chapters three and four. I would like to quote Adrienne Rich to conclude this chapter. She describes the choices educators such as herself faced in 1979, making a statement which, in my opinion, is universal and can also be applied nowadays. Educators, according to Rich, have either:

to lend our weight to the forces that indoctrinate women to passivity, self-depreciation, and a sense of powerlessness...or to consider what we have to work against, as well as with, in ourselves, in our students, in the content of the curriculum, in the structure of the institution, in society at large (Rich, 1979: 240).

Educators, then, must educate their students, particularly female students, to think in an autonomous and critical way. They are not supposed to put ideas in their heads to maintain their traditional role as secondary beings, but teach them how to challenge these imposed ideas so that they can be independent beings.

We will analyze in chapters three and four how this is presented in the two case studies chosen, *The Back Room* and *Atonement*.



## **CHAPTER 2: TRAUMA AND THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF CREATION**

“Not talking or writing about upsetting experiences [...] can be unhealthy for several reasons. Holding back and not talking about an upsetting experience is bad in and of itself because of the physiological work of inhibition. A deeper problem is that when individuals inhibit, they fail to translate their thoughts and feelings into language. Without resolving their traumas, they continue to live with them.

The health benefits of writing or talking about the traumas [...] are twofold. People reach an understanding of the events and, once this is accomplished, they no longer need to inhibit their talking any further” (Pennebaker, 1997:103).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *trauma* means *a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, or an emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to long-term neurosis*. Trauma presupposes that the wounding happened unexpectedly, “that the threat to one’s existence was so overwhelming that it could not be fully absorbed by consciousness” (Harris, 2003: 31-32).

The relationship between trauma, writing, and healing that I describe in this chapter is perfectly summarized by James Pennebaker in the quotation above. I would like to illustrate the relationship between these three elements using ideas from different authors, who, by the way, share a common view: if you give your trauma words, you will heal your soul and your health will improve. Nevertheless, the debate on the power of writing to heal the soul is ample, because there are authors such as M. R. Morrison (*Poetry as therapy* (1987)) and Gloria Orenstein (“Creation and Healing: An Empowering Relationship for Women Artists” (1985)) who doubt about links between writing and healing. Gloria Orenstein (1985), for instance, thinks that writing can be counter therapeutic when employed “primarily in competition for recognition and fame, rather than self-definition” for “failure may trigger a serious depression” (Morrison, 1987: 211).

On the contrary, trauma can act as a stimulus to the imagination. Why? According to Louise DeSalvo, “the distressed person tries to replace what has [been] lost or restore what has been damaged”, thus “creativity, seems a basic human response to trauma and a natural emergency

defense against depression” (DeSalvo, 1999: 175). There are other authors such as Anne Hudson that affirms that “unhappiness, suffering, trauma and oppression stimulate creativity” and that they “have evoked some of the greatest literature, art, and music in western culture” (Hudson, 2006: 53). Works such as Pablo Ruiz Picasso’s painting *Guernica* (1937), Francisco de Goya’s painting *Los Fusilamientos del tres de mayo en Madrid* (1813-1814), Anne Frank’s *Anne Frank’s Diary* (1942-1944), or Eric Clapton’s song *Tears in Heaven* (1991) are clear examples of works resulting from traumatic situations<sup>1</sup>. Thus, in the same way that painting or music can be healing for those who use them as therapy, writing is a kind way of facing whatever needs to be faced. Judith Harris adds that, at different moments in history, writers such as Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Alice James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Henry Miller, D.H.Lawrence, Isabel Allende, Alice James, or Dorothy Allison, to name but a few, have described how they “have consciously used the writing of their artistic works to help them heal from the thorny experiences of their lives, especially from dislocation, violence, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, rape, political prosecution, incest, loss, or illness” (DeSalvo, 1999: 4). Besides, publications through the 1990s and into the Twenty-first century (Bolton (1999), DeSalvo (1999), Hunt (2000), Zimmermann (2002), Harris (2003) and Pennebaker (2004)) have continued to provide evidence of the therapeutic benefits of writing. Gillie Bolton quotes Helene Cixous’s words when stating that:

Writing is a primary act. It comes from within. I feel it welling up inside me, growing out of me, transforming itself into language. The still dumb flow of writing passes through my woman’s body, searching for words...I write because I have to. I need to write, like I need to eat, like I need to sleep, like I need to make love. It’s like a second heart. I feel that, by writing I continually renew myself and replenish vital forces. I need the incessant movement from body to symbol, from symbol to body; for me the two things are intrinsically linked (Bolton, 1999: 225).

Furthermore, Gillie Bolton affirms that “[w]riting does not seem to allow onto the page more than the writer can bear at that time” (Bolton, 1999: 21) and that “in writing, there’s a power that is all

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<sup>1</sup> *Guernica* was created in response to the bombing of Guernica, Basque Country, by German and Italian warplanes at the behest of the Spanish Nationalist Forces in 1937, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). *Los Fusilamientos del tres de mayo en Madrid* (*The Shootings of May Third* 1808) was painted by Goya in 1813-1814 as a response to the French domination of Spain in 1808. Anne Frank wrote her diary between 1942-44 while she was hiding from the Nazis. *Tears in Heaven* was written after the death of Eric Clapton’s son in 1991.

yours [women's]" (Bolton, 1999: 23), because women can create whatever they wish and use their imagination, which is boundless. Here, Bolton adopts Cixous's views of writing as salvation for women perhaps from the essentialist *écriture féminine* position of French model.

There are different opinions on the links between therapy and writing. Thus, there are scholars who believe that there is a distinction between therapeutic and creative writing: "[t]here is an assumption in the minds of many people in the literary world, including some of those who teach, that producing writing which has value as art and using one's writing as a means of gaining therapeutic benefit are mutually exclusive" (Hunt, 2000: 185). For Celia Hunt, writing for therapeutic purposes "involves the same mechanism of shelving the critical faculty as 'writing as art' [since] 'writing as art' and 'writing as therapy' are intricately bound up with each other, and trying to draw a firm dividing line between them risks compromising both" (Hunt, 2000: 188-189).

Judith Harris states that victims who repress their trauma "may suffer somatic symptoms in which the verbal narrative is displaced to the suffering of the body" (Harris, 2003: 32) and James Pennebaker adds that not talking with people about traumatic experiences "has been linked to recurrent unwanted thoughts, higher levels of anxiety and depression, insomnia and a variety of health problems" (Pennebaker, 1997: 25), since there are studies which demonstrate that not talking about important emotional events could be "a health risk" (Pennebaker, 1997: 25). Traumas can be problematic for both inhibited and uninhibited people, although those who are inhibited can have more problems. Both groups need, however, to tell their stories to find some relief, improve health, and reduce stress. James Pennebaker believes that writing is so beneficial because it "promotes self-understanding" (Pennebaker, 1997: 93). Through writing and rewriting our past, this author thinks we revise it, since "repeatedly confronting an upsetting experience allows for a less emotionally laden assessment of its meaning and impact" (Pennebaker, 1997: 95).

Trauma can be experienced by a single person or by a group of people, so it can be individual or collective. Collective trauma can also be difficult to be transformed into words, since there is an entire generation of people who needs to express themselves. Sometimes "[g]roups [...] can foster a



conspiracy of silence in which extremely important topics are simply never broached [...] Entire countries could evolve seriously disturbed views of the world. During times of economic or other cultural upheavals, a society's values could become so distorted as to be certifiably insane" (Pennebaker, 154). This is the reason why collective traumas, such as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) or World War II (1939-1945), also need to be given words if people want to heal.

DeSalvo believes that we change our relationship to trauma through writing since "we gain confidence in ourselves and in our ability to handle life's difficulties" because "[w]e recast our recovery from trauma as something we can accomplish rather than seeing our ordeal as something to be passively borne" (DeSalvo, 1999: 46). But, why write? This author gives us possible answers to this question:

- 1- Writing is cheap. You don't need special equipment to begin [...].
- 2- Writing doesn't need to take much time, [t]hough we can take as long as we chose [...].
- 3- Writing is self-initiated; writing is flexible: we can write when we can [...].
- 4- Writing is private, or you can share it [...].
- 5- Writing is portable. It can be done practically anywhere [...]. (DeSalvo, 1999: 13).

DeSalvo states that "[w]riting permits the construction of a cohesive, elaborate, thoughtful personal narrative in the way that simple speaking about our experiences doesn't" (DeSalvo, 1999: 41). The reason could be that we revise our past and "discover deeper and more complex truths" (DeSalvo, 1999: 11) because we have more time to link the events with the feelings at that time and describe them in detail. This idea is connected with Susan Bolton's, who stated that "writing, done at the right stage, which makes sense and accurately conjures up a past situation, will offer its writer the most release and relief because it will have expressed and communicated their feelings effectively" (Bolton, 1999: 200). However, "no one felt excited [...] immediately after writing about the worst experiences of his or her life" (Pennebaker, 1997:37), so it seems that the 'right stage' described by Bolton does not excite people. DeSalvo argues that a narrative can be healing just under certain conditions, and the main condition is that we must write about anything that pains us. She gives us a list:

1. A healing narrative renders our experience concretely, authentically, explicitly, and with a richness of detail [....].
2. A healing narrative links feelings to events [....].
3. A healing narrative is a balanced narrative. It uses negative words to describe emotions and feelings in moderation; but it uses positive words, too [....].
4. A healing narrative reveals the insights we've achieved from our painful experiences [....].
5. A healing narrative tells a complete, complex, coherent story [....] (DeSalvo, 1999: 57-59-60-61).

Finally, the therapeutic process of writing according to this author goes like this:

We receive a shock or a blow or experience a trauma in our lives. In exploring it, examining it, and putting it into words, we stop seeing it as a random, unexplained event. We begin to understand the order behind appearances [...] Expressing it in language robs the event of its power to hurt us; it also assuages our pain. And by expressing ourselves in language, by examining these shocks, we paradoxically experience delight which comes from the discoveries we make as we write, from the order we create from seeming randomness or chaos [...] Ultimately, then, writing about difficulties enables us to discover the wholeness of things, the connectedness of human experience. We understand that our greatest shocks do not separate us from humankind. Instead, through expressing ourselves, we establish our connection with others and with the world (DeSalvo, 1999: 43).

Susan Zimmerman also states that trauma can be healed by means of writing. A clear example is given in her book, in which she uses her own life experience. Her first child, Katherine, developed a neurological disorder that left her unable to talk or walk and Zimmermann transformed her sadness into acceptance through writing. She supports her statement by saying that “[t]he act of writing brings a structure and order to the chaos of grief”, since, “[b]y giving voice to fears, anger, and despair, by letting go of old dreams and hopes, our self-healing powers come into play” (Zimmermann, 2002: 18). She believes that we can access our deepest thoughts when we write, since we grow from our sorrows “and arrive at a place where life is more full and more joyful than we ever thought possible” (Zimmermann, 2002: 19).

On this point, I would like to come back to James Pennebaker. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, he affirms that not talking about traumatic experiences is unhealthy. I would like to conclude with this interesting quotation:

Whether we talk into a tape recorder or write on a magic pad, translating our thoughts into language is psychologically and physically beneficial. When people write about major upheavals, they begin to organize and understand them. Writing about the thoughts and feelings of traumas, then, forces individuals to bring together the many facets of overwhelmingly complicated events. Once people can distill complex experiences into more understandable packages, they can begin to move beyond the trauma (Pennebaker, 1997: 185).

This quotation shows the beneficial effects of writing on people's health and its therapeutic power to heal wounded souls. Thus, it is essential to communicate traumatic experiences because translating problems into language is the only way we can overcome trauma. However, this author believes that "[w]hen we self-reflect to the point of self-absorption", writing "becomes maladaptive" (Pennebaker, 1997: 196). This means that if we can do something to change a traumatic situation, we should try "to change it rather than writing about it and try to change it through writing" (Pennebaker, 1994). So, we are required to act instead of writing when we face a serious trauma, but, if we cannot act, we must try not to be absorbed when writing about it.

In short, communicating traumatic experiences "can forge a powerful and lasting bond with others" (Pennebaker, 1997: 115) since there is always a person who is supposed to be reading or listening to the traumatic story and those people or groups of people who do not talk with other people about their traumas might develop serious illnesses. As Bolton states, "[n]othing is impossible with your pen" (Bolton, 1999: 23).

This is pertinent because we will see the relation between traumatic experiences and the therapeutic power of creation when we analyze C.'s and Briony's wounded souls in *The Back Room* and *Atonement*. C. and Briony revisit and re-write their past in order to achieve redemption: personal in the case of Briony, and collective in the case of C., since, as we will see, she might be speaking for an entire generation of Spanish women who were traumatized by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and who were indoctrinated by The *Sección Femenina* in Francoist Spain, from 1939 to 1975. We will see if they finally heal their wounded souls by writing their traumas and giving their sorrows words.



### CHAPTER 3: CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE'S *EL CUARTO DE ATRÁS*

#### [*THE BACK ROOM*] (1978)

*El Cuarto de Atrás [The Back Room]* (1978) is a novel written by Carmen Martín Gaité (1925-2000). She was a Spanish writer born in Salamanca whose childhood and adolescence years were marked by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the Francoist Regime (1939-1975). *The Back Room* could be read as a meditation upon Spain's recent past, which has only become possible after the death of Dictator Francisco Franco (1892-1975). C., who stands for Carmen Martín Gaité, represents three different periods of time in *The Back Room*: the post-Franco writing of the book; the evocation of C.'s childhood during the Second Republic (1931-1936); and the time of the post-war Spain and the Francoist Regime (1939-1975). C., a woman who has lived through the post-war period, examines not just her life but the situation of the entire country at the moment when the Franco era draws to a close. Her experiences as a woman have not appeared in the official "History"<sup>1</sup> of Francoism written by men, so the protagonist transmits her own trauma and experiences that have been confined to the private space of the household up until the death of Franco. C. tells us, for instance, that she was frightened by the bombings during the war or how the *Sección Femenina* tried to indoctrinate women. Therefore, a whole generation of Spanish women who have experienced the same is represented in the book and, we can say, paid tribute to.

The title alludes both to the playroom of C.'s childhood home in Salamanca and to a back room of the mind, filled with painful memories that C. has repressed for almost forty years. In addition, *The Back Room* contains a very interesting ambiguity: "Technically", Joan Lipman Brown illustrates, Martín Gaité "integrates two narrative genres, the fantastic and the realistic, which classically are not congruent" (Brown, 1981: 13). This is because it is a fantastic novel while at the same time is the true story of a woman in postwar Spain and the Francoist Regime, as we will see later on in this

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<sup>1</sup> As Jane Thompson (1983) pointed out in Chapter 2, "History" is the official history written by men: "So long as men have written the history books and controlled 'the general currency of thought' the philosophy and agitation, the poetry and literature, the art and the politics of women have been obliterated from the records" (Thompson, 1983: 20).

dissertation. Carmen Martín Gaité uses the fantastic mode to approach the real history and her past experiences, since the recollection of her experiences is elicited by a mysterious man in black who pays her a visit on a stormy night. During the course of their conversation, a heap of paper sheets is growing next to C.'s typewriter, which, as we will see, comprises the novel itself.

### 3.1. Patriarchy, indoctrination and education in *The Back Room* (1978)

“Deprivation is an overriding theme of *El Cuarto de Atrás*, in financial, intellectual and personal terms” (Brown, 1981: 16).

Francisco Franco, the leader of the “National” Army, won the Spanish Civil War against the Republicans and ruled Spain for almost forty years, from 1939 to 1975. He believed that Spain needed a powerful ruler “in order to return to the greatness [Spain] had known under the control of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile and Leon in the 15<sup>th</sup> century” (Labanyi, 1989: 57). In *The Back Room* C. points out that Franco, who came to power when she was only nine, was an omnipresent political ruler at that time, a ruler who controlled everything, from the educational system to the family structure using the *Sección Femenina*. Franco, C. complained, was a kind of big brother who was always watching people. She regretted how the self-called ‘Caudillo de España’ had projected himself upon all spaces belonging to the public and had also been capable of controlling “History” and time:

[Francisco Franco] had been the devious and secret motive force of that block of time, the chief engineer and the inspector and the manufacturer of the transmission gears, and time itself, whose flow he had damped, damned, and directed, with the result that one barely felt either time or him move... (The Back Room, 137).<sup>2</sup>

Ellen Mayock illustrates how the Franco Regime reinforced the patriarchal order in which men would be “the dynamic leaders” while women “would exist vicariously through the agency of their husbands” (Mayock, 2004: 25). Thus, women were to be “the custodians of honor”, who served as

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<sup>2</sup> “[Francisco Franco] había sido el motor tramposo y secreto de ese bloque de tiempo, y el jefe de máquinas, y el revisor, y el fabricante de las cadenas del engranaje, y el tiempo mismo, cuyo fluir amortiguaba, embalsaba y dirigía, con el fin de que apenas se les sintiera rebullir ni al tiempo ni a él”.

“models of virtue for their husbands and teachers of Christian mores for their children” (ibid.). During the Francoist Regime, Aurora Morcillo Gómez adds, women “were confined to their biological functions as wives and mothers where their only identity emanated from the objectification of their bodies” (Morcillo Gómez, 1999: 57). The *Sección Femenina* was a good instrument to reach that end. Joan Lipman Brown states that in *The Back Room*

[t]he strength of the definition of a woman’s place is seen to derive from specific, politically-enforced institutions, most notably the *Sección Femenina* of Franco’s youth program. Fulfilling a mandatory Social Service obligation, young women were taught to be the descendents of Isabel La Católica (Brown, 1986: 41).

In *The Back Room* Martín Gaité illustrates her dissatisfaction with the training received when she “grudgingly” did her *Servicio Social*:

All the harangues that our instructors and female comrades subjected us to in those inhospitable buildings, reminiscence at once of airplane hangars and popular movie houses, where I grudgingly did my Social Service, sewing hems, doing gymnastics, and playing basketball, all turned out to have the same aim: to get us to accept, with pride and joy...our status as strong women, the complement and mirror of the male (90).<sup>3</sup>

The *Sección Femenina* “was in a sense itself a form of cultural control in that it permitted the appearance of female development involved in public life without giving women entry to formal politics” (Graham, 1995: 193). In other words, women were given the idea that they were taking part in public life while their opinions were not valid because men were the ones who wrote “History”. The *Servicio Social*, which was overseen by the *Sección Femenina*, was obligatory for all unmarried Spanish women between the ages of seventeen and thirty. It was “one of Franco’s primary agents for socializing young women into the National Catholic ideology of separate spheres and true Catholic womanhood” (Morcillo Gómez, 1988: 51). María Teresa Gallego Méndez writes that “[p]roof of completion of *Servicio Social* was necessary in order to obtain a passport, a

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<sup>3</sup> “Todas las arengas que monitores y camaradas nos lanzaban en aquellos locales inhóspitos, mezcla de hangar y de cine de pueblo, donde cumplí a regañadientes el Servicio Social, cosiendo dobladillos, haciendo gimnasia y jugando al baloncesto, se encaminaban...al mismo objeto: a que aceptásemos con alegría y orgullo...nuestra condición de mujeres fuertes, complemento y espejo del varón”.

professional degree, a civil service post and to be allowed to complete for university posts or hold public office” (Gallego Méndez, 1983: 64). In *The Back Room* C. illustrates how

[a] girl couldn’t leave the country without having completed her Social Service, or at the very least having given a good indication, during the course of her studies at the university, that she had the makings of a good future wife and mother, a worthy descendent of Queen Isabella (*The Back Room*, 36).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it was the *Sección Femenina* that tried to inculcate the values embodied by Queen Isabel *La Católica* to young single Spanish women. However, C. never had doubts about Queen Isabel. C. stated that she believed “in the Devil and in giant Saint Christopher and in blessed Barbara –in all mysterious beings, in a word. But not in Queen Isabella” (*The Back Room*, 102). C. also remembered the kind of indoctrination into fascist ideologies that she received as a child:

[We would learn] that domestic economy helps to safeguard the national economy and that garlic is excellent for the bronchial tubes. We would learn to apply a bandage, to decorate a kitchen so that it looked cute as anything, to keep our skin from chapping and cracking and to ready with our own hands the layette for the baby destined to come into the world to be proud of the Catholic Queen, defend her from calumny, and engender children who in turn would extol her, till the end of time. (*The Back Room*, 92).<sup>5</sup>

C. and all other Spanish women, therefore, were instructed to be good mothers and wives who were never supposed to complain about their fate. However, C. received contradictory messages from her mother, who believed in the importance of educating women:

[C.’s mother] loved to...read and top lay children’s games, and she would have liked to study at the university...but it wasn’t the custom in those days for girls to prepare for a career, so the thought never even crossed her mind to ask to do so...My mother was not the sort who was eager to see me married. She never taught me to cook, or to sew either (*The Back Room*, 92)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> “Una chica no podía salir al extranjero sin tener cumplido el Servicio Social o, por lo menos, haber dejado suponer, a lo largo de los cursillos iniciados, que tenía madera de futura madre y esposa, digna descendiente de Isabel la Católica”.

<sup>5</sup> “[Aprenderíamos] que la economía doméstica ayuda a salvar la economía nacional y que el ajo es buenísimo para los bronquios, aprenderíamos a poner un vendaje, a decorar una cocina con aire coquetón, a prevenir las grietas del cutis y a preparar con nuestras propias manos la canastilla del bebé destinado a venir al mundo para enorgullecerse de la Reina Católica, defenderla de calumnia y engendrar hijos que, a su vez, la alabaran por los siglos de los siglos.”

<sup>6</sup> “Le encantaba...leer y jugar a juegos de chicos, y hubiera querido estudiar una carrera...pero entonces no era costumbre, ni siquiera se le pasó por la cabeza pedirlo...mi madre no era casamentera, ni me enseñó tampoco nunca a coser ni a guisar”.



C.'s mother's behavior contrasted sharply with her grandmother's expectations about women. C.'s grandmother was the perfect Spanish *domestic angel*, always cleaning her house. Her house was spotless, the same as Spain was supposed to be under Franco's protection. When C. went to Madrid, she questioned her grandmother's habits, thus, in a sense, we can conclude that she was also questioning Francoist Spain. C. remembers that she "dreamed of living in a garret where clothes were never hung up and there were books strewn all over the floor, where nobody hunted down the flecks of dust drifting in the sunbeams" (*The Back Room*, 84).<sup>7</sup> This image is very similar to the back room in her house in Salamanca when she was a child, a space where she played, imagined anything, and could be free. One of the pictures in C.'s apartment, to provide an example, is entitled *A Topsy-turvy World*. It depicts "a sheep shepherding several farm hands, fish flying over a sea in which horses and lions swim, and a sky filled with buildings that look down on the sun and the moon, set in the earth" (Gleen, 1985: 168). These scenes, which involve a reversal of the laws of nature, can represent how C. reverts the traditional role imposed on Spanish women by the *Sección Femenina*. In fact, as we can see in *The Back Room*, C. in her mature years lives surrounded by piles of books and messy stuffs, thus she is not the perfect *domestic angel* that the Spanish woman was supposed to be.

As John Lott (1999) states, politicians in totalitarian countries avoid creating "an independent and critically reasoning constituency" since "governments use public education and public ownership of the media to control the information that their citizens receive. More totalitarian governments [...] make greater investments in publicly controlled information" (Lott, 1999: 127). Therefore, this defines perfectly how the totalitarian Francoist Regime controlled all areas of the curriculum between 1939 and 1975 and tried to undo the educational reforms of the Second Republic with the help of José Ibáñez Marín (1868-1909), the Minister of Education. Ibáñez Marín closed down many Republican schools for "allegedly nurturing the spirit that had animated the Republic" (Herr, 1971: 223). He also promoted Catholicism in the classroom since, under his rule, "Catholic doctrine repla-

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<sup>7</sup> "soñaba con vivir en una buhardilla donde siempre estuvieran los trajes sin colgar y los libros por el suelo, donde nadie persiguiera a los copos de polvo que viajaban en los rayos de luz".

ced the hated beliefs of the Republicans as the basis of educational philosophy, along with nationalist doctrines of the *Falange* in a modest second place” (Herr, 1971: 223). Thus, religion became a central subject at all levels of schooling, although C. pointed out that students did not pay attention to that boring subject. Franco addressed women during the first demonstration in honor of the “National” army and promoted Queen Isabel’s life as a case study since “she was able to maintain her faith and the purity of her virtues” (Weissberger, 2004: 190). Therefore, C. illustrated in *The Back Room* how Queen Isabel la Católica became a model of virtue to be imitated by Spanish women:

We were placed beneath her advocacy, we were given talks about her iron will and her spirit of sacrifice, we were told how she had held the ambition and the despotism of the nobles in check, how she had created the Holy Office, expelled the traitorous Jews, given up her jewels to finance the most glorious undertaking in our history (*The Back Room*, 91).<sup>8</sup>

A primary school textbook for children in the 1940’s and 1950’s was *España Nuestra*, a book authored by Ernesto Giménez Caballero (1899-1988), a founding member of *Falange Española*. A central character in this book was Queen Isabel La Católica. Queen Isabel’s profile was “superimposed on a map of Spain” (Weissberger, 2004: 190) in *España Nuestra*. This map was supposed to be colored red and yellow, red because it was “the color of blood spilled for the Caudillo” and yellow because it was “the color of the Spanish soil where the Nationalists triumphed” (Weissberger, 2004: 191). This is an illustration reproduced in Weissberger (2004):



Figure 1. “España como la Reina Isabel” (Spain as Queen Isabel) (Weissberger, 2004: 191)

<sup>8</sup> “Se nos ponía bajo su advocación, se nos hablaba de su voluntad férrea y de su espíritu de sacrificio, había reprimido la ambición y el despotismo de los nobles, había creado la Santa Hermandad, expulsado a los judíos traicioneros, se había desprendido de sus joyas para financiar la empresa más gloriosa de nuestra historia”.

C. complained about the model of behavior represented by Queen Isabel and illustrated how she refused to believe that she was a good model to be imitated when she looked at her face in the textbook:

Perhaps it was just a bad portrait of her, but of course those textbooks didn't particularly inspire you to keep that image before you as a mirror, and of course some of the instructresses who urged us to imitate her also had their mouths set in that same rigid grin and had that same cold gleam in their eyes, even though they spoke continually of happiness (*The Back Room*, 91).<sup>9</sup>

C. had no doubts about the education that she received in public schools and these books that were used to indoctrinate children in postwar Spain:

I would sit myself down on the green sofa opposite this sideboard and look at the saints in the history book, neither glorious exploits nor exemplary conduct struck me as trustworthy models of behavior. Kings who stirred up wars, conquistadors and heroes disturbed me. I was suspicious of their prideful attitude as they set food in foreign territory, defended forts, or planted crosses and flags (*The Back Room*, 92-92).<sup>10</sup>

To summarize, in Francoist Spain the home was “the limited, private space, where women [were] assigned to participate in the nation, but from afar” (Enders and Radcliff, 1999: 10), and they were supposed to be domestic angels. In “*El Cuarto de atrás*, [which] is an eminently public document on and of women's history” (Epps, 1991: 84), Martín Gaité depicts the negative public education she received as a child, which prepared girls for being secondary citizens. This education leaves a very negative mark on her, and she tries to give her sorrows words by publicly denouncing the in-

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<sup>9</sup> “[T]al vez es que hubiera salido mal en aquel retrato, pero, desde luego, no daban muchas ganas de tener aquella imagen como espejo, claro que algunas de las monitoras que nos instaban a imitarla también tenían aquel rictus seco en la boca y aquella luz fría en los ojos, aunque hablaran continuamente de la alegría”.

<sup>10</sup> “[S]entada en el sofá verde, frente a este aparador, miraba en mi infancia los santos del libro de historia, ni los acontecimientos gloriosos ni los comportamientos ejemplares me parecían de fiar, me desconcertaban los reyes que promovían guerras, los conquistadores y los héroes, recelaba de su gesto altivo cuando ponían el pie en tierra extraña, defendían fortines o enarbolaban cruces y estandartes”.

Authoritative teachers in postwar Spain resemble fictional Miss Jean Brodie, the authoritative teacher depicted by Muriel Spark in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). Miss Brodie said: “*If only you small girls would listen to me I would make you the crème de la crème*” (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 14), which reminds me of the vulnerable girls indoctrinated by the *Sección Femenina*. Authoritative teachers stand in sharp contrast with the teacher in Manuel Rivas's *La Lengua de las Mariposas* (1995), who was a charming fictional character killed because he supported the República. Another clear example is the Literature teacher in the film *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), who inspired his students to change their lives of conformity through his teaching of literature, inciting them to live life to the fullest (*Carpe Diem*). In the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (Mike Newell, 2003), Katherine Anne Watson, who teaches History of Art in a conservative school for girls, is another example of a teacher who encourages classroom discussions.

doctrination she received. She does that when she feels safe, I mean, when Franco's censorship is no longer a problem because he is dead; she does that by writing *The Back Room*. I will come back to this in section 3.1.2.

### 3.1.1. Sexual miseducation of women

I would like to begin this section by quoting Anne McClintock to give you a general idea of the status of women from 1939 to 1975: "Franco erased modernization in postwar Spain by reinstalling the Napoleonic Code<sup>11</sup> of 1889 to limit women to second class citizenship" and in this scheme the family "functioned to legitimize such a hierarchy as natural" (McClintock, 1995: 357). The aim of the self-called "Caudillo" was very clear: to reinforce the role of women as mothers and wives and make them to be happy about this. C. denounced her own situation in postwar Spain and stated that: "I could tell him that...we lived surrounded by ignorance and repression. I could tell him about those textbooks with all sorts of things missing that kept us from getting a decent education" (*The Back Room*, 64)<sup>12</sup>. C. mentioned how the amount of propaganda produced by the *Sección Femenina*, whose leader was Pilar Primo de Rivera,<sup>13</sup> was aimed at molding women into domestic angels:

Proud of [Queen Isabel's] legacy, we would learn to make the sign of the cross on our children's foreheads, to air a room, to make use of every last scrap of cardboard and meat, to remove stains, to knit mufflers and wash window curtains, to smile at our husband when he came home in a bad mood, to tell him that *tanto monta monta tanto Isabel como Fernando*, [Isabel and Fernando are equals partners] (*The Back Room*, 92).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In Europe after the French Revolution," the Napoleonic Code was the first modern law to decree that a wife's status was subsumed within that of her husband" (McClintock, 1995: 358). As a result of the Napoleonic Code "the husband must protect his wife while the wife must obey her husband" (Enders and Radcliff, 1999: 21). The Second Republic in Spain (1931-1936) had erased the Napoleonic Code. In 1939, however, Franco "reverted back to pre-republic law, forcing women to participate as citizens exclusively through their spouses" (McClintock, 1995: 358-9).

<sup>12</sup> "Podría decirle que...vivíamos rodeados de ignorancia y represión, hablarle de aquellos deficientes libros de texto que bloquearon nuestra enseñanza".

<sup>13</sup> Pilar Primo de Rivera stated that "[las] mujeres nunca descubren nada. Les falta el talento creador, reservado por Dios a las inteligencias masculinas" (Morcillo Gómez, 1999: 51).[Women never discover anything new. They lack the talent to create, which has been given by God only to men]. This is my own translation.

<sup>14</sup> "Orgullosas de[l] legado [de Isabel La Católica], cumpliríamos nuestra misión de españolas, aprenderíamos a hacer la señal de la cruz sobre la frente de nuestros hijos, a ventilar un cuarto, a aprovechar los recortes de cartulina y de carne, a quitar manchas, tejer bufandas y lavar visillos, a sonreír al marido cuando llega disgustado, a decirle que tanto monta monta tanto Isabel como Fernando".

A Spanish domestic angel was not supposed to be instructed in sexual matters, of course, but “urged to contribute to the rebuilding of a nation destroyed by the pernicious ‘modern’ values of liberals, Jews, and Communists” (Weissberger, 2004: 189). Their contribution, therefore, would be by means of motherhood. Thus, while C. stated that the *Sección Femenina* believed that spinsterhood was a misfortune, motherhood was a virtue. On the contrary, sex, which was an unavoidable fact in order to become a mother, was avoided from the public life. If it appeared associated to a woman, it had negative connotation. A clear example will be provided by those songs by Concha Piquer in section 3.1.2., in which “fallen” women surrendered to sex and they were unhappy and disgraced. The lack of sex education of Spanish women is clearly seen in the following extract from the novel, in which C. confessed that “[a]llusions to sex scared [her], they were impossible to grasp and of ambiguous gender”<sup>15</sup>. She illustrated her lack of education on sex as a child because there were terms, such as *lesbian* or *homosexual*, whose mind had no place ready to receive:

‘Am I a what?’ [Lesbian] was a word that was never used, not even secretly. If I had ever heard it, I would have noted it down, just as I did all the others I encountered that were new to me and whose meaning I looked up later in the dictionary. I would surely have regarded what it referred to as unthinkable, something one had to draw a thick veil over, ‘to pass over quickly like a cat on hot coals’, as the Religion teacher used to say when it came time to explain the Sixth Commandment. Expressions such as *fornicate* and *covet by neighbor’s wife* were explained by way of euphemisms that didn’t explain anything (*The Back Room*, 195)<sup>16</sup>.

To sum up, women in postwar Spain were instructed to be domestic angels but they were told nothing about sex. The school books told them nothing about sexual matters and the Church linked sex to sin. C. rebelled against this imposed silent and the role of women as secondary beings who had to find fulfillment through motherhood and marriage, as we will see later on in section 3.2.

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<sup>15</sup> “Me daban miedo las alusiones al sexo, eran inapresables y ambiguas’.

<sup>16</sup> “¿Que si soy qué?, [Lesbiana] era una palabra que no circulaba jamás, ni siquiera clandestinamente, si al hubiera oído, la habría apuntado como todas las que aprendía nuevas y cuyo significado aclaraba luego consultando el diccionario, seguro que su sentido me habría parecido inaceptable, algo sobre lo que había que correr un tupido velo, ‘pasar como gato por brasas’, como decía el sexto mandamiento; expresiones como fornicar y desear la mujer de tu prójimo venían explicadas por medio de eufemismos que multiplicaban los rodeos”.

### 3.1.2. Indoctrination through Romance Fiction

In postwar Spain, women were influenced by two elements that were supposed to offer an escape from the official propaganda: popular songs and the readings of romance fiction. In *The Back Room*, C. sees the *novela rosa* (or romance fiction) as representative of Francoist ideology and criticizes it because of its nature to deceive readers. She stresses the impact that these art forms have had upon the members of her generation, “coloring their view of the world and their expectations” (Gleen, 1985: 169). In *Usos Amorosos de la Posguerra Española* (1981) Martín Gaité also illustrated how women felt victims to fantasies that made them unable to distinguish between the real and the romantic world:

Cuanto más desgraciadas se sintieran en la realidad, más necesitaban de aquella identificación con las heroínas inventadas por María Mercedes Ortoll, María Luisa Valdefrancos o Concha Linares Becarra, a las que cuando menos lo esperaban les llovía del cielo una ilusión que las hacía sentirse transfiguradas, distintas. El mago de esta alquimia, por supuesto, era siempre un hombre (*Usos Amorosos de la Posguerra Española*, 144).<sup>17</sup>

But, what does *novela rosa* mean? Critic Andrés Amorós defines it as:

Sí, ese tipo de novelas que leen en el metro las chicas que reparten paquetes...y en las clases aburridas las estudiantes, y en sus casas casi todas las demás. Son novelas de bolsillo, baratas (unas 8 pesetas), cortas (unas 120 páginas), que se suelen publicar semanalmente, editadas en papel muy ordinario y con un dibujo atractivo en la portada (Amorós, 1968: 11).<sup>18</sup>

The male and female protagonists of the *novela rosa* were always the same types: the male hero was always tall and strong and the heroine, conversely, was always younger, smaller, and less privileged to emphasize the hero's dominance. Janice Radway points out that “[t]he female protagonist's stature place[d] her in the background in comparison to the physically and economica-

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<sup>17</sup> "The more miserable they felt in reality, the more they needed to identify themselves with those heroines invented by Maria Mercedes Ortoll, Maria Luisa Valdefrancos or Concha Linares Becarra, to whom an illusion rained down that made them feel transfigured, different. The Wizard of this alchemy, of course, was always a man". This is my own translation.

<sup>18</sup> "Yes, that sort of novels that girls who deliver packages read on the subway...as do the students during boring lessons, and at home almost all the others. These are paperback novels, cheap (about 8 pesetas), short (120 pages), which are usually published weekly, edited on ordinary paper with a very attractive picture on the cover". This is my own translation.

lly advantaged male protagonist, who always rescue[d] the woman: the happy ending restore[d] the status quo in gender relations when the hero enfold[ed] the heroine protectively in his arms” (Radway, 1984: 81). C. mentions Carmen de Icaza (1899-1979), who was the author of the romance novel *Cristina Guzmán, profesora de idiomas* (1936), as an example of the doctrines given by the *Sección Femenina* in postwar Spain:

Carmen de Icaza, the literary spokeswoman of those ideals, in her most famous novels, *Cristina Guzmán*, which all girls of marriageable age read sitting on cots and many soldiers carried about in their knapsacks, had written: “Life smiles on the person who smiles on it, not on the one who makes faces at it”. One was to smile as a matter of precept, not because one felt like it or ceased to feel like it. Her heroines were active and practical. They choked back their tears, confronted any and every calamity without a Word of complaint, looking toward a future edged in pink clouds, invulnerable to the pernicious dejection that could seep in only through the cracks of indolence (*The Back Room*, 89).<sup>19</sup>

This novel taught a particular attitude because it encouraged women to be happy, which kept them oppressed by not rebelling against their secondary roles as wives and mothers. We cannot forget that Franco tried to control the readers through their readings, and that was the reason why he imposed specific moral codes over them:

His state-managed mass media promoted certain types of beginnings, endings, and codes, and these had to be adhered to by any author who wanted to write *novela rosa*. At the same time, any writer who intended to engage with the genre had to follow the demands of an audience that was exclusively used to a constrained literary discourse which did not challenge status quo (Faura, Godsland, and Moody, 2004: 48).

Thus, pessimism had to be avoided since a negative depiction of life could be seen as a direct critique of the Francoist Regime. C. is also disappointed after reading *El Amor Catedrático* because of its supposed happy ending: a young woman goes to university but she marries one of her professors at the expense of her career. C. believes that this is not a happy ending and she says:

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<sup>19</sup> “Carmen de Icaza, portavoz literario de aquellos ideales, había escrito en su más famosa novela *Cristina Guzmán*, que todas las chicas casaderas leíamos sentadas a la camilla y muchos soldados llevaban en el macuto: ‘La vida sonrío a quien le sonrío, no a quien le hace mueca’, se trataba de sonreír por precepto, no porque se tuvieran ganas o se dejaran de tener; sus heroínas eran activas y prácticas, se sorbían las lágrimas, afrontaban cualquier calamidad sin una queja, mirando hacia un futuro orlado de nubes rosadas”.

The ending disappointed me a Little. I wasn't really convinced that that girl had done the right thing by marrying a man much older than herself and a monomaniac in the bargain...placing so many hopes in studying for a career and defying the society that prevented a woman from realizing those hopes, and then having it all turn out that way, the usual happy ending. Who could tell if it would have been all that happy, since sooner or later that girl was bound to feel disillusioned. Moreover, why did all novels have to end when people got married? (*The Back Room*, 87-88).<sup>20</sup>

Surprisingly, there is a moment in the novel when C. confesses that she liked romance fiction when she was a child and considers how her reading of the *novela rosa* influenced her view on things, namely on Carmencita Franco Polo:

Influenced by my reading of romantic novels, which used to place tearful stress on the dissatisfactions of rich heiresses, I thought of Franco's daughter as a creature trapped in a prison and under an evil spell, and I pitied her so much that I would even have liked to know her so as to be able to console her (*The Back Room*, 59).<sup>21</sup>

The woman whose life was a *novela rosa* and who was a perfect model to be imitated before, a heroine, is now a woman who makes C. sad to see her. As C. watches the televised funeral procession of Franco, she remembers the day when she first saw Franco's daughter:

That image served as the basic catalyst: seeing her walking along slowly, dressed in mourning and with that bitter, empty expression that her face has been set in for years now, hidden only with the greatest of difficulty by her official smile, brought back to my mind with total clarity that other morning that I saw her in Salamanca with her crocheted socks and her little black patent leather slippers, coming out of the cathedral. 'No one recognizes her', I thought, 'but she's that same girl. She wouldn't recognize me either. We've grown up and lived in the same years. She was the daughter of an army officer from the provinces. We've been the victims of the same manners and mores, we've read the same magazines and seen the same movies. Our children may be different, but our dreams have surely been much the same (*The Back Room*, 136-137).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "A mí el final me defraudó un poco, no me quedé muy convencida de que la chica esa hubiera acertado casándose con un hombre mucho más viejo que ella y maniático por añadidura...tanto ilusionarse con los estudios y desafiar a la sociedad que le impedía a una mujer realizarlos, para luego salir por ahí, en plan happy end, que a saber si sería o no tan happy, porque aquella chica se tuvo que sentir decepcionada tarde o temprano; además, ¿Por qué tenían que acabar todas las novelas cuando se casa la gente?"

<sup>21</sup> "Influida por la lectura de las novelas rosa, que solían poner un énfasis lacrimoso en las insatisfacciones de las ricas herederas, pensaba en la niña de Franco como en un ser prisionero y sujeto a maleficio, y me inspiraba tanta compasión que hasta hubiera querido conocerla para poderla consolar".

<sup>22</sup> "Esa imagen significó el aglutinante fundamental: fue verla caminando despacio, enlutada y con ese gesto amargo y vacío que se le ha puesto hace años, encubierto a duras penas por su sonrisa oficial, y se me vino a las mientes con toda claridad aquella otra mañana que la vi en Salamanca con sus calcetines de perlé y sus zapatitos negros, a la salida de la



In her rebellion against romance fiction, C. includes in her narrative the crudest experiences in her life, as we will see in section 3.1.2. She also includes an unfortunate childhood friend whose parents are in prison because they had supported the Republicans. She is alone and surrounded by disapproval. Her friend reads Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) since she is not attracted by romance fiction. The explanation is simple: I think that a poor girl whose Republican parents are in prison cannot find excitement in silly happy-ending stories about perfect people. This is also C.'s point of view.

Finally, other means of indoctrination during the postwar period were the popular songs. They played an important role in the indoctrination of Spanish women in the same way that romance fiction did. Carmen Martín Gaité provides a clear example in Concha Piquer's<sup>23</sup> popular songs. C. admires Concha Piquer and the lyrics of her songs because she laments her dull life whenever she listens to them: "[a] passion such as that was forbidden us sensible, decent young ladies of the new Spain" (*The Back Room*, 155)<sup>24</sup>. Concha Piquer's songs had always a tragic ending. Unlike the Francoist propaganda, which supplied the girls with songs of hope and happiness, Piquer's songs dealt with outcast women who had lost their sense of direction because of a man. These women were the "other", the fallen women. They were "[m]adwomen, bold women, scatterbrained women [...] skirting the limits of transgression, and the order to halt in their tracks inevitably rang out the moment they made their getaway [...] There were no extenuating circumstances, the condemnation was total" (*The Back Room*, 121). On the contrary, C. did not condemn them, but she "imagined them in [her] dreams and admired their courage, though [she] would not have dared flee from the light of the sun, [she] knew that [she] would escape, rather, by way of the dark, secret twists and

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catedral. No se la reconoce –pensé-, pero es que aquella niña, tampoco ella me reconocería, hemos crecido y vivido en los mismos años, ella era hija de un militar de provincias, hemos sido víctimas de las mismas modas y costumbres, hemos leído las mismas revistas y visto el mismo cine, nuestros hijos puede que sean distintos, pero nuestros sueños seguro que han sido semejantes".

<sup>23</sup> Concha Piquer (1906-1990) was a singer and actress of the post-war period. She was from Valencia. Some of her most famous song in which she sang of fleeting passions were "*Ojos verdes*", "*Tatuaje*", "*Y sin embargo, te quiero*", and "*Suspiros de España*".

<sup>24</sup> "una pasión como aquella nos estaba vedada a las chicas sensatas y decentes de la nueva España".

turns of the imagination, by way of the spiral of dreams, by way of a path within, without creating a scandal or breaking down walls” (*The Back Room*, 122). The moral of those songs was, therefore, very clear: if you, Spanish woman, behaved “badly” –if you chose to be a lover rather than a wife, or a lover rather than a mother-, you were unfortunate, so it was better for you to be a mother and a wife than *la otra* or *la querida* (a sort of lover with no wedding ring), ie. the fallen woman, the whore who has always been the anti-angel in the house. Thus, in these songs we can find again a subtle way of indoctrinating girls since women were instructed against rebellion.

### 3.1.2. Trauma and the therapeutic power of creation

As we have seen in section 3.1., in Francoist Spain the home was “the limited, private space, where women [were] assigned to participate in the nation, but from afar” (Enders and Radcliff, 1999: 10). The education that C. received when she was a child marked her life forever and the lives of an entire generation of Spanish women who were indoctrinated by schools books, by certain songs such as Concha Piquer’s, and by institutions such as the *Sección Femenina*.

The Spanish Civil War was also a collective trauma for all citizens. C. recalls, for instance, how she could not talk about her mother’s brother, who had been killed by the Fascists, or how those years were the years of cold and fear. C. describes a memory in which she and her sister were “cutting out paper dolls in the back room” (*The Back Room*, 61)<sup>25</sup> when their parents instructed them to go to the refuge. C. explains that “[she and her family] went out to the stairway and ran into [their] third-floor neighbor, a very nervous army major, with a mustache like Ronald Colman’s, who kept shouting as he dashed downstairs to the outside floor: ‘Don’t rush, all of you, there’s no need to rush!’” (*The Back Room*, 61).<sup>26</sup> C. also recalls the bombings she witnessed, saying: “[o]ne day a bomb fell in a cruller shop on the Calle Pérez Pujol, near home. The cruller seller’s whole family was killed. The daughter was very nice, she played with us in the little square. Her father didn’t like to go to

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<sup>25</sup> “Recortando mariquitas en el cuarto de atrás”.

<sup>26</sup> “Salimos a la escalera, nos tropezamos con el vecino del Segundo, un comandante muy nervioso, con bigote a lo Ronald Colman, que iba gritando, mientras se despeñaba hacia el portal: ‘¡Sin precipitación, sin precipitación!’”.

the shelter...” (*The Back Room*, 60)<sup>27</sup>. There is a moment when C. states: “The truth of the matter is that I remember my childhood and my adolescence, despite everything, as a very happy time in my life” (*The Back Room*, 69-70).<sup>28</sup>

Why does she state this? I think that there might be three main reasons why C. had a happy childhood and adolescence in sad years. Firstly, her mother represented freedom and a good model to be imitated –in the sense that she thought that women must go to university. I suppose that C. would be encouraged by her mother to be stronger. Secondly, after the civil war, C.’s house had a back room full of food, which gives us a clue of the economic situation of her family at a time of starvation in the country. In addition, C. and her father visit a spa in Galicia in 1945, while many people in Spain still have *cartillas de racionamiento*<sup>33</sup>. Thirdly, C. describes the importance of the back room to her life, especially to her childhood. She says:

Disorder and freedom reigned. We were allowed to sing at the top of our lungs, move to furniture around as we pleased, jump on top of a rickety old safe with broken springs that we used to call the poor sofa...it was a kingdom where nothing was forbidden. Up until the war, we felt entirely at home there, and there was more than enough room for us to study and play in it...the room was entirely ours, period (*The Back Room*, 187).<sup>29</sup>

Not just the Spanish Civil War, but the disappearance of the back room as a consequence afflicted C. deeply: “There’s a sort of dividing line, separating childhood and adulthood, that began to be marked off in ’36. The ‘amortization’ of the back room and its gradual transformation into a store room was one of the first changes that took place on this side of that line” (*The Back Room*, 187-88).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Un día cayó una bomba en una churrería de la calle Pérez Pujol, cerca de casa, mató a toda la familia del churrero; la niña era muy simpática, jugaba con nosotros en la plazuela, al padre no le gustaba ir al refugio”.

<sup>28</sup> In post-war Spain, rationing controlled the size of the ration distributed on a particular day.

<sup>29</sup> “Reinaban el desorden y la libertad, se permitía cantar a voz en cuello, cambiar de sitio los muebles, saltar encima de un sofá desvencijado y con los muelles rotos al que llamábamos el pobre sofá...era un reino donde nada estaba prohibido. Hasta la guerra, habíamos estudiado y jugado allí totalmente a nuestras anchas...el cuarto era nuestro y se acabó”.

<sup>30</sup> “Hay como una línea divisoria, que empezó a marcarse en el año treinta y seis, entre la infancia y el crecimiento. La amortización del cuarto de atrás y su progresiva transformación en despensa fue uno de los primeros cambios que se produjeron en la parte de acá de aquella raya”.

C. enjoyed the disorder of the back room because she was given free rein to create when she was there with her sister, but, after the civil war, “[t]he disagreeable mingling of the smells of erasers and glue with those of the hoarded sausages and stewed partridges that displaced [C.’s] toys in the old sideboard marks the end of [C’s] preschool freedom and the beginning of forty years of Francoist repression” (Weissberger, 2004: 202). Thus, if the back room represented a place for freedom and imagination, we can say Franco and Francoist Spain would represent a *front room* where freedom and imagination cannot exist, a *front room* that destroys the back room. By the way, the physical back room is the only room that we never see as readers in the present moment of the novel. The only back room we see, however, is the back room of C.’s mind, the subconscious where she keeps her painful memories.

In connection with this idea, Barbara Weissberger points out that “[t]he backroom of the novel’s title is both literal and metaphorical” (Weissberger, 2004: 202) and that is the reason why its disappearance as a room for freedom and imagination is so important and traumatic. Carmen Martín Gaité explains herself the difference between the physical backroom in her childhood and her metaphorical back room:

El cuarto de atrás es un cuarto que pervive invariablemente en mi memoria; es el cuarto en el que yo aprendí a leer y a jugar. Pero, por otro lado, el título alude también simbólicamente a una especie de desván que, creo, tenemos todos en el cerebro, el cual está separado de las estancias más ordenadas de la mente por una cortina que sólo se descorre de vez en cuando. Los recuerdos que pueden darnos alguna sorpresa viven siempre en “el cuarto de atrás” (Brown, 1981: 18).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the literal back room in C.’s house in Salamanca is different from the metaphorical back room of her mind. The latter is, on the contrary, not a physical place, but “the storehouse of painful memories of three years of civil war and thirty-six years of dictatorship that [C.] has repressed” (Weissberger, 2004: 202). Those painful memories emerge occasionally “from behind the curtain

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<sup>31</sup> “The back room is a room that invariably remains in my memory; It is the room in which I learned to read and play. But, on the other hand, the title also symbolically refers to a kind of loft which, I believe, we all have in the brain, which is separated from the tidiest rooms in the mind by a curtain that only opens sometimes. Memories that can take us by surprise live always in "the back room". My own translation.

that normally conceals them” (Glenn, 1985: 168).

C. needs “to give wings to words” (*The Back Room*, 148) and tell people what she and women like she, have suffered under a totalitarian regime. The problem is that, at the beginning of the novel, she suffers from a tremendous mental block to tell her story. Catherine Davies says that *The Spanish Transition*, the time when Martín Gaité wrote *The Back Room* (1978), “was marked by a plethora of memoirs, published by figures, eminent and unknown, who recounted their experiences during the War, their lives in hiding or in exile, and their subversive activities against Franco” (Davies, 1998: 239). Martín Gaité does not want to write a memoir book, since she finds these books very boring. She promises that her book will have to be a fantastic one, which can be a symbol of her own rebellion against official narratives imposed by the regime.

At this point, I would like to illustrate the idea given at the beginning of this chapter regarding Martín Gaité’s use of the fantastic mode to approach her real history and her experiences. There is a point, almost at the beginning of the novel, when a fantastic man pays C. a visit. The strange visitor is a man in black who arrives at C.’s home very late on a stormy night. His only presentation is a call from the bar downstairs, and C. barely describes him at all –although she says that his eyes are like cockroaches-. There are certain hints, such as his smell, that lead us to think that he could be the devil itself. He brings a small gold box with pills. The gold box acts, as Ruth El-Saffar states, “like a tiny wedge, to hold open the door that had once so firmly separated the world of imagination from that of reality” (El-Saffar, 1986: 9). The pills are designed, the man in black says, to loosen C.’s memory: “[t]hey’re for one’s memory”, he explains, “to restore it, but also to disorder it” (*The Back Room*, 102). After taking a pill, C.’s memories begin to crowd, and, as El-Saffar states, “the jumble of recollection begins to disengage from its place of confinement in C.’s mind to be brought into consciousness” (El-Saffar, 1986: 6). Disturbing remembrances, such as C.’s father’s confiscated Pontiac or her murdered socialist uncle rise up for articulation, waves of images “that thirty years of repression [have] forced into hiding under benches, behind curtains” (ibid.). A good symbol for those repressed memories can be the cockroach that appears just before the arrival of the

man in black. Its appearance is sudden and frightening. C. is afraid of it, but he tells her not to be afraid since it is harmless. Like cockroaches, painful memories can be dark and ugly, and they can appear suddenly. However, like cockroaches, they are harmless. The man in black accompanies C. to the kitchen to find the cockroach in the same way that he “accompanies her on a journey through her memory” and “[w]ith his assistance, both fears are confronted and conquered” (Brown & Smith, 1987: 68). He receives C.’s confession. However, “far from ordering up penances, as the priests of her childhood were wont to do, he continues to honor precisely those things C. has learned to condemn in herself” (El-Saffar, 1986:7). He, thus, “facilitates the recovery of memories which, due to the threat of censorship and the natural aversion to the pain they bring, were sealed off from scrutiny for decades” (Brown, 1981: 17-18). It is as if he pulls back the curtain to which Martín Gaité refers in the back room of her mind and makes her face her painful memories.

The book ends when C. begins to sleep: “[n]ow, free of the insomnia which guilt and fear had brought about, the sleep that had eluded her before descends comfortably upon her” (El-Saffar, 1986: 9). Brown affirms that “literature affords its creators with a spiritual exorcism or catharsis” (Brown, 1986: 69). In addition, she states that “[l]iterature for Martín Garite has one final, overriding characteristic: it achieves a cathartic exorcism” (Brown, 1986: 67). Carmen Martín Gaité herself has recognized the liberating aspect of *The Back Room*: “*El Cuarto de atrás* ha sido una experiencia liberadora porque no me parece una novela triste...yo no he tenido la sensación de mundo cerrado, sino de apertura” (Brown, 1986: 68)<sup>32</sup>. In fact, the book is an open-ended text in which readers can ask themselves to what extent the man in black was real or not.

As we can see in *The Back Room*, fantasy has been the path C. has chosen since she was a girl to escape from those postwar years of oppression when she was not allowed to say certain things on the street, such as her relationship to a socialist who had been murdered. In her adulthood as a writer, C. puts this in words by means of her writing of the novel. Martín Gaité states that literature

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<sup>32</sup> “*The Back Room* has been a liberating experience because I think that it is not a sad novel...I have not had the feeling of a closed world, but of its openness”. My own translation.

may function as an escape from reality, as “una evasión de la rutina, como rechazo de un mundo agobiante, obligatorio, y consabido” (Brown, 1987: 64)<sup>33</sup>. Thus, as a child, C. and a friend invent the isle of Bergai and write stories to escape from the sad realities of the postwar years: “Bergai was my first refuge” (*The Back Room*, 183).

Once Franco is dead, C.’s memories are still painful but they are no longer dangerous because there can be no fear of recrimination. Eventually, we can say that Martín Gaité demonstrates the therapeutic value of creation, as the novel liberates C., who is her alter ego in the book, from those long-repressed memories and fears: “[i]n *The Back Room* we have not a novel, but the process of confession and redemption by which the novel can be born” (El-Saffar, 1986: 9). In the end, Ruth El-Saffar states, “C. transforms her tossing and turning, through the recovering of a mysterious dialogue born out of insomnia, into a virtue” (El-Saffar, 1986: 11) with the assistance of the man in black, of course. Thus, “[u]pon inventing a single interlocutor” Carmen Matín Gaité “[was] empowered to write” (El-Saffar, 1986: 14) and give words to her most intimate and painful memories. In fact, while they are talking, a pile of books is growing next to C.’s typewriter, which is supposed to be *The Back Room*. The mysterious man “accomplishes in one evening what it takes psychiatrists years to do” (Brown, 1986: 68), since those fears and painful memories are “confronted and conquered” (ibid.). In the end, C. is not afraid of cockroaches in the same way that she is not afraid of sad memories.

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<sup>33</sup> "an escape of the routine, as a rejection of an oppressive, compulsory, and ubiquitous world ". Mi own translation.





#### **CHAPTER 4: IAN McEWAN'S ATONEMENT (2001)**

Ian Russell McEwan (1948-present) is a British novelist and screenwriter born in Aldershot, Hampshire. He begins his career writing short stories, which are followed by famous novels such as *The Cement Garden* (1978) or *Enduring Love* (1997). He wins the Man Booker Prize with *Amsterdam* in 1998. In 2001 McEwan writes *Atonement*, which opens in 1935, three years before the outbreak of World War II. At that time, Victorian moral standards and conservative values are reestablished in England, so the situation of women is not very different from that in Spain during the Francoist Regime (1939-1975).

The Tallises belong to an ancient, wealthy and conservative family that lives in a large country house in Surrey, England. The little girl of this family, Briony, misunderstands three scenes dealing with sex due to her lack of education in the field of sexuality and the influence of her readings of romance fiction. Briony is so influenced by them that she has a distorted vision of reality; she sees it as a romance novel, and writes stories in which marriage is “a reward withheld until the final page” (*Atonement*, 7). Thus, if we put together the lack of sexual education and the influence of a certain type of reading, we can say that young Briony is cast aside from the truth. An extract from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), which serves as preface to *Atonement*, gives us a clue of what type of fiction we are going to read, as we will see in detail later on.

The misunderstandings mentioned above mark the rest of her life (and they ruin the lives of those people involved: her older sister Cecilia and her loved one, Robbie Turner). Briony spends the rest of her life trying to atone for her crime, although those people who can forgive her, Cecilia and Robbie, die as a consequence of World War II. Thus, she tries to be granted forgiveness by the creation of a novel entitled *Atonement*, where she changes their real stories to give them happiness.

*Atonement* is written in the novel by Briony in her mature years. Readers, however, do not find this out until the epilogue, which Briony writes in 1999. Narration changes to first person here. It is Briony, now a famous novelist, who confesses her story and the modifications she has included in

order to give her sister and Robbie their happiness, a happiness that she ruined when she was a teenager influenced by the reading of romance fiction and handicapped by her lack of sex education. The question is (as Briony asks herself): “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” (*Atonement*, 371). Maybe the attempt is all, as she herself concludes. Anyway, to this we will go back later on in this dissertation.

#### **4.1. Patriarchy, indoctrination and education in *Atonement* (2001)**

“When [Briony’s] father was home, the household settled around a fixed point. He organized nothing, he didn’t go about the house worrying on other people’s behalf, he rarely told anyone what to do- in fact, he mostly sat in the library. But his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted. When he was there, it no longer mattered that her mother retreated to her bedroom; it was enough that he was downstairs with a book on his lap. When he took his place at the dining table, calm, affable, utterly certain, a crisis in the kitchen became no more than a humorous sketch; without him, it was a drama that clutched the heart” (*Atonement*, 122).

The quotation above is just a brief introduction to Briony’s view on family in *Atonement*, and it will be developed later on in this work. Before that, however, I would like to give a general overview on the situation of women in England from the end of the Nineteenth century to the period between Wars (1919-1945) so that we can place the quotation above in context. During the decades from 1870 to 1910, middle-class women in England were organizing themselves to fight for certain rights, “on behalf of higher education, entrance to the professions, and political rights” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 18), which was known as first-wave feminism. It was a period of women’s activity focused on the promotion of equal rights for men and women, such as women’s suffrage, or sexual, reproductive and economic rights. In short, patriarchal values were under attack. Showalter illustrates how “[i]n the decades from 1870 to World War I, [...] feminists battled over the question of what women should be” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 124), and states that these battles “were waged on many fronts” (ibid.).

On the contrary, the period after World War I, from 1919 to the end of World War II in 1945, was one of conservatism about sex roles in England. There were two main signs of this conservatism: the reestablishment of late Victorian institutions “formed by and for middle-class women” and “the shift of feminist interests away from questions of women’s independence to questions of women’s relationship to men” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 197). The theories of British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835-1918), which maintained at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the demands of intellectual work and menstruation were antagonistic, were reintroduced in England after 1919. He affirmed that “[n]or does it matter greatly by what channel the energy be expended; if it be used in one it is not available for use in another. What Nature spends in one direction, she must economize in another direction” (Showalter, 1985 [2011]: 125). It was clear that the right direction for the energy to be used, according to Maudsley, was procreation, not intellectual activities. There was even a *female malady* “associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 7) opposed to an *English malady*, “associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized men” (ibid.).

As a consequence of the reestablishment of Victorian values in England after World War I, women became secondary beings and secondary citizens again and “feminist feeling, which had reached a peak in the suffrage movement, subsided” (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 196). Women, thus, were “encouraged by advertising and urged by the government to return to domesticity and chastity” (ibid.) and feminist rebellion equated with an unhappy life:

In this matter the small minority of women who have other aims and pant for other careers, cannot be accepted as the spokeswomen of their sex. Experience may be left to teach them, as it will not fail to do, whether they are right or wrong in the ends which they pursue and in the means by which they pursue them; if they are right, they will have deserved well the success which will reward their faith and works; if they are wrong, the error will avenge itself upon them and their children, if they should ever have any (Showalter, 2011 [1985]: 147).

After 1919, therefore, women were encouraged to be submissive *domestic angels* again (they would be encouraged to be domestic angels until the end of World War II in 1945): “as a mother [a

woman] is the light and sweetness of the family, as a wife the vale of tears of her husband, as a daughter, an angel who keeps watch and prays for the lovingness and peace of the home” (Nash, 1999: 28). Cecilia Tallis and her cousin Lola do not seem to accommodate to this role, but Briony’s heroines are *angels in the house*, which gives us a clue to her education and views on sex:

Fortune presents [Arabella] a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor –in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on a windy sunlit day in spring (*Atonement*, 3).

Briony’s mother, Emily, is supposed to be a domestic angel. However, she is always sick in bed (or pretending to be sick). Emily is a kind of recluse in her bedroom, away from domestic problems: “[Briony’s] mother, when she wasn’t nurturing her migraines, seemed distant, even unfriendly [...] Emily Tallis wanted to share only tine frets about the household, or she lay back against the pillows, her expression unreadable in the gloom, emptying her cup in wan silence” (*Atonement*, 20). Maybe her sickness is a way of escaping her pointless life, with an absent husband –probably having a love affair in London- and a day full of long and empty hours since she has nothing to do to earn her daily bread: “Wronged child, wronged wife. But she was not as unhappy as she should be. One role had prepared her for the other [...] She did not wish to know why Jack spent so many consecutive nights in London. Or rather, she did not wish to be told” (*Atonement*, 148-149). Anyway, “age and weariness would return Jack to her, and nothing would be said, or needed to be said” (*Atonement*, 150). Just as we saw on *The Servicio Social* in Chapter 3, here women are also secondary beings, legal appendages of their husbands and patient domestic angels waiting for them while giving them a smile. No surprise that Emily should think about her pointless life the way she does, as we can see in the following extract:

[Emily] had sources of contentment in her life –the house, the park, above all, the children- and she intended to preserve them by not challenging Jack. [...] Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a

long stretch of time. His deceit was a form of tribute to the importance of their marriage (*Atonement*, 148).

On the contrary, Emily's sister, who is Lola's mother, receives the same education as Emily but she decides to rebel. She has got divorced and she has abandoned their children to go away with her lover. Emily criticizes her attitude since it prevents her from being a good mother, the role typically assigned to women: "[Briony] had heard her mother criticize the impulsive behavior of her younger sister Hermione and lament the situation of the three children, and denounce her meek, evasive brother-in-law Cecil who had fled to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford" (*Atonement*, 8). As a consequence, Briony's view on divorce is not very different from her mother's.<sup>1</sup> Hermione can be compared to those women appearing in the songs by Concha Piquer in post-war Spain. They are social outcasts because they choose to follow a wrong path in life instead of following the traditional role assigned to them, a choice which eventually brings them disgrace and dishonor. Maybe influenced by her mother, Lola is not a domestic angel but a provocative teenager who chooses to follow a path that eventually makes her a rich lady instead of a social outcast.

#### **4.1.1. Sexual miseducation of women.**

Before describing in detail the sexual miseducation received by women in *Atonement*, I will briefly introduce the relation between sex education, innocence, and western children from the second decade of the Twentieth century to nowadays, focusing on England. This is very important since innocent Briony is educated (or miseducated) in England at that time.

Innocence is "not inherent to children" (Kehily & Montgomery, 2003: 246), but "stems from a culturally constructed ideology which positions parents as protectors of their offsprings from external forces of corruption" (Wilks, 2009:2). The relation between children and innocence was an important tenet in the [Twentieth] century, and its importance has persisted to nowadays, "along with the conviction that [children should not] be introduced to ideas about sexuality, which [could]

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<sup>1</sup> Briony says "it [divorce] could easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity" (*Atonement*, 9).

corrupt their naivety” (Heins, 2007: 23).

An Obscene Publications Act was published in Britain in 1857, the purpose of which was “to prevent immoral literature from falling into the wrong hands” (Heins, 2007: 27-29), associating sexual material with a negative effect on vulnerable groups such as children. Floyd Martinson suggests that the lack of sexual knowledge adults have given to their children “has been instilled to the point that the difficulty of talking about sexuality to children [appears] to be almost natural”, as maintaining sexual ignorance “has come to be perceived as a fundamental concern within the contemporary western child’s upbringing” (Martinson, 1994: 102). Therefore, sex and desire have been concealed from western children by parents “subscribing to a socially constructed cult of childhood innocence” (Wilks, 2009: 1). Marjorie Heins adds that adults “[have] instill[ed] their offspring with ignorance of sexually motivated human interactions, pursuing a philosophy of protection through censorship” (Heins, 2007:5).

If this is still so, obviously the situation was more severe in 1935. Adults in the Tallis family, therefore, can be blamed for the lack of Briony’s sex education in 1935, when she discovers by herself the existence of “the unthinkable” (*Atonement*, 4). Briony’s mother tells her nothing about sexuality and there are no books at home in which she can find the information. Paul Marshall, just to provide an example, has a suspicious wound that he claims to have gained whilst pulling Lola’s brothers apart, a clue that he might have been involved in a sex game with Lola. In spite of being very clever, Briony is unable to see in it a sex marker since she has not been instructed in this field. In addition, adults in the Tallises’ house are shocked when Briony shows them Robbie’s wrong version of the letter to Cecilia in which he writes the word *cunt*. This illustrates that sexuality could be seen as taboo even in the adult world, particularly within the upper-class society of which Briony and Cecilia are part.

There is a passage in the novel when Briony’s mother, Emily, confesses that her parents thought that hot weather encouraged loose morals and that she and her sister were never allowed out of their house in high summer, highlighting that she was brought up to behave in a certain fashion that

reminds us of the instructions given by the *Sección Femenina* in Francoist Spain. As Steve Humphries states, “the daughters being locked away in the heat is symbolic of a particularly prevalent ideology during the interwar period [1919-1939] when the main burden of sexual responsibility –or more accurately the responsibility to avoid sex- seems to have been placed by parents on their daughters” (Humphries, 1988: 41). We cannot forget that women were expected to have a virtuous behavior while men were not.

Briony learns to perceive sex as wrong for unmarried or divorced women, highlighting how “society creates moral boundaries defining the limits of acceptable sexual behavior” (Wilks, 2009: 8). In Briony’s play *The Trials of Arabella*, the narrator adopts her point of view and says: “This is the tale of spontaneous Arabella, who ran off with an extrinsic fellow. It grieved her parents to see their first born evanesce from her home to go to Eastbourne without permission” (*Atonement*, 16). In Briony’s stories, therefore, it seems that sex has to be ordered, I mean, it must occur after marriage to be positive: “[m]arriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal nearness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union” (*Atonement*, 9). Therefore, *The Trials of Arabella* “told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed” (*Atonement*, 3). The play deals with the convenience of sensible love and Briony depicts how lovers have to be sensible if they want love to be all very well, which demonstrates an understanding of love devoid of passion: “Arabella almost learned too late, [t]hat before we love, we must cogitate!” (*Atonement*, 368). Thus, innocent Briony tries to instruct her older brother with this play, because it is for him, “to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of a wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid” (*Atonement*, 4). Briony’s words, in spite of being addressed at a man, are reminiscent of those given to young unmarried women by *The Sección Femenina* in postwar Spain.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3, sections 3.1 and 3.1.1.

Briony's first stories end when people get married, since she cannot conceive sex. That is the reason why "[i]n the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, [Briony's] heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further" (*Atonement*, 9), a good ending of happy romance fiction. Critic Louise Wilks affirms that "Briony has been denied the opportunity of participating in adult life" and this is what "creates her confused interpretation of sex" (Wilks, 2009: 5). Therefore, it is her lack of sex education and her belief that sex has to occur after marriage to be positive that explain her shock on seeing Cecilia and Robbie making love in the library, as we will see later on. She needs a reasonable explanation to that since she cannot believe that Cecilia does not follow the model of virtue that their mother represented. The best explanation could be that Robbie is a sex maniac who wants to take advantage of her sister. However, Briony is wrong when she considers Robbie to be a sex maniac, but it is her sex education -or, better, the lack of it- which makes her associate sexual behavior outside marriage with immorality.

#### **4.1.2. Indoctrination through Romance Fiction.**

Briony knows nothing about the adult world, much less about sex. Unlike her precocious cousin Lola, she is just an innocent young girl: "[h]idden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets [...] Nothing in her life is sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding" (*Atonement*, 5). She has not been instructed in the field of sexuality, although, in her writings, sex is positive, at the very best, after marriage, not before that: "Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable –sexual bliss" (*Atonement*, 9).

We may think that Briony can misinterpret any scene dealing with sex due to her lack of sex education and her lack of understanding of the adult world. However, critic Brian Finney adds that



Briony has “[a] constant need to dramatize [...] shaped by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read” (Finney, 2004: 79) and he states that she “suffers from an inability to disentangle life from the literature that had shaped her life, imposing the patterns of fiction on the facts of life” (ibid.). At this point, it is very important to mention the passage from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) that serves as preface to *Atonement*. It seems as if we were given a clue about what we are going to read: living in her own thoughts and fascinated by Gothic literature, Catherine Morland, *Northanger Abbey*’s heroine, like Briony, cannot separate the world of reality from that of fiction. The extract from Jane Austen’s novel that serves as preface to *Atonement* is an extract from the key conversation between Henry Tilney and Catherine where Henry informs her that her speculation about General Tilney has been based on conjecture, the same as Briony’s speculation about Robbie’s supposed intentions to attack Cecilia. In the preface to *Atonement*, Tilney says: “[C]onsider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained [...]. [W]hat ideas have you been admitting?” Briony, therefore, could have asked herself the same question before accusing Robbie.

At the age of eleven Briony writes her first story, “a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking, she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader’s respect” (*Atonement*, 6). Her first play, *The Trials of Arabella*, follows a logical order, that of romance fiction: the heroine, after disgrace, is saved by a medical prince:

The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash towards a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humor. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor –in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on ‘a windy sunlit day in spring’ (*Atonement*, 3).

Although the story “may have been a melodrama”, Briony “[has] yet to hear the term [...] The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order” (*Atonement*, 8) and was meant to instruct her older and womanizer brother Leon with a clear

message: “love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed” (*Atonement*, 3). She tries to “guide [her brother] away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid” (*Atonement*, 4). Cecilia stays at home reading Samuel Richardson’s sentimental novel *Clarissa* (1748), which is itself an intertextual reference to *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Clarissa’s sister’s name is Arabella, which may lead us to think that Briony has already read that novel and she names the heroine in her first play after that character. When the adult world escapes to her understanding, order must be imposed to the things she does not understand, and she imposes her own patterns to reality. That is the reason why she misunderstands the scenes dealing with sex between Robbie and Cecilia and believes that he is a sex maniac instead of a man in love with her sister, as we will see later on in detail. Robbie, who could have been the medical prince that saved the heroine, Arabella (who could stand for Cecilia), is seen by Briony as a threat to her sister, so “[Briony] must first protect [Cecilia] against him, and them find ways of conjuring him safely on paper” (*Atonement*, 157). Anyway, we can apply the following words from Arabella’s father to innocent Briony:

My darling one, you are young and lovely,  
 But inexperienced, and though you think  
 The world is at your feet,  
 It can rise up and tread on you (*Atonement*, 16).

Eventually, it is Briony’s deepest remorse as she grows up and starts to understand the real “facts of life” which rises up and treads on her, since her innocence on sexual matters and the influence of romance fiction make her misunderstand reality and ruin the lovers’ happiness (along with her own life).

#### **4.2. Trauma and the therapeutic power of creation**

Briony’s trauma is caused by the misinterpretation of facts due to her lack of sex education and her lack of understanding of the adult world, as I said before. Critic Brian Finney adds that her trauma is a consequence of her “inability to disentangle life from the literature that [has] shaped her life”

(Finney, 2004: 79). Besides, she can become the heroine of her own world: “[Briony] was not playing Arabella because she wrote the play, she was taking the part because no other possibility had crossed her mind, because that was how Leon was to see her, because she was Arabella” (*Atonement*, 13). Young Briony just exists in a family in which her mother is always sick in bed, her father is always in London (probably having love affairs with other women) and her siblings are not at home because they attend to University. Maybe she becomes a writer when she is eleven not just influenced by the readings of her first sentimental novels, but also to deal with her isolation in a house with a broken family, in “a strange house where politeness [is] all” (*Atonement*, 57).

Thus, influenced by the readings of romance fiction, Briony imagines an alternative world that runs parallel to the real one, in which everything needs to be in order, including sex. When this world escapes to her understanding, order must be imposed to the things she does not understand, and she imposes her own patterns to reality. Now we will analyze the three scenes dealing with sex that make Briony accuse Robbie and ruin his life forever (not just Robbie’s, but also Cecilia’s, and hers).

The first scene that Briony misinterprets takes place by a fountain. This is a crucial moment because it is the beginning of a series of misunderstandings that destroy Cecilia’s and Robbie’s lives. While Robbie and Cecilia are arguing about the broken pieces of an ancient vase belonging to the Tallises, Briony believes that he is proposing marriage to her sister. She thinks that this is possible since she has written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saves a princess from drowning and ends by marrying her. Thus, the humble woodcutter can be Robbie and the princess can be Cecilia. Briony sees the scene as if it is part of a romance novel. Suddenly, Robbie raises her hand and Briony believes that he is threatening her sister, who dips into the fountain. The innocent girl does not know, however, that Cecilia dips into the fountain to retrieve a piece of the broken vase, and, from that moment on, she thinks that she has to protect Cecilia from that man. Now, Briony is part of the adult world “in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent” (*Atonement*, 40). She needs a world she can control in which order must be imposed

over that chaotic scene. Thus, Briony imposes order to the illogical sequences of the adult world by imposing a plot to a plotless sequence. “[A] plot is exactly what she imposes” (Wood, 2002: 30), critic James Wood points out, and from this moment on, she supposes that Robbie is morally dubious.

After a few hours, Robbie sends a letter to Cecilia and Briony reads it on purpose (we cannot forget that she is trying to protect her sister from that man). When she sees the word *cunt*, Briony thinks that Robbie is a “sex maniac” (*Atonement*, 2001: 156), a kind of monster who wants to rape her sister. Critic Nick Michael affirms that “it is Robbie’s erotic letter to Cecilia that stretches Briony’s tolerance for adult chaos to the breaking point” (Michael, 2010: 23). Later that day, when Robbie and Cecilia are making love at the library, Briony believes that her sister is being forced. Her misinterpretation, as we will see, assumes that Cecilia, who is a passive victim of Robbie’s sexual desire, needs to be protected:

Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight. The scene was so entirely a realization of her worst fears that she sensed that her over-anxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books. This illusion, or hope of one, was dispelled as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. No one moved. Briony stared past Robbie’s shoulder into the terrified eyes of her sister. He had turned to look back at the intruder, but he did not let Cecilia go. He had pushed his body against hers, pushing her dress right up above her knee and had trapped her where the shelves met at right angles. His left hand was behind her neck, gripping her hair, and with his right he held her forearm which was raised in protest, or self-defense (*Atonement*, 123).

The scene is told from innocent Briony’s perspective, since it never occurs to her that Robbie’s sexual desire for her sister might be reciprocated by her. So, while Cecilia chooses to rebel against the ideology of her mother, the only sexual values that Briony is aware of are those that her mother embodies and those that she reads in romance fiction: sex is positive just after marriage. Later that night, when Paul Marshall is having sex with Lola –maybe he is raping her–, Briony strongly believes that the attacker she has seen must have been Robbie. She puts together all the pieces: the scene by the fountain, the letter, and the scene at the library, and she draws her own conclusions. Her determination to accuse Robbie, as Wood points out, “is bound up with her impulses to make a

story of it but also shows how Briony has been unable to shed her old melodramatic impulses” (Wood, 2002:30). Briony affirms that she has seen Robbie, but she has not. Lola keeps quiet since she can be interested in becoming the wife of Paul Marshall, a man who is supposed to become rich very soon: “Lola did not need to lie, to look her supposed attacker in the eye and summon the courage to accuse him, because all that work was done for her, innocently, and without guile by the younger girl [Briony]...If only she, Briony, had been less innocent, less stupid” (*Atonement*, 168).

Robbie thinks that “[Briony] was a child in nineteenth thirty-five [...] But not every child sends a man to prison with a lie. Not every child is so purposeful and malign, so consistent over time, never wavering, never doubted” (*Atonement*, 228-229). He does not think of her innocence in the field of sexuality and he does not know that Briony had no intention to deceive. She confesses later that she felt sorry for what she did from the very moment of her accusation against Robbie, but he dies in France before he can be made aware of.

Brian Finney states that “the constant need to dramatize by Briony having been shaped by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read” (Finney, 2004: 79) makes her think of Robbie as a sex maniac and accuse him of rape, “a moment for which the rest of her life will be an atonement” (Wood, 2002: 30):

If something happened to Robbie, if Cecilia and Robbie were never to be together...Her secret torment and the public upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime. The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened (*Atonement*, 288).

This passage shows how “guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime” (*Atonement*, 173). The word *forgiveness* – forgiveness from Cecilia and Robbie-, becomes from this moment on an objective. Briony’s conscience can no longer bear her crime, and she leaves her family behind and takes nursing as a “sort of penance”, in Cecilia’s words (*Atonement*, 212). By doing this, Briony lives unhappily “abandoning herself to a life of strictures, rules, obedience, housework, and a constant fear of

disapproval” (*Atonement*, 276) instead of attending University, as Cecilia did. It seems that Paul and Lola Marshall, who are as guilty as Briony, do not feel so remorseful, at least Lola doesn’t. They have a foundation and donate money for agricultural projects in Africa, but Lola in her eighties acts as if she was beyond good and evil, as if she transcends morality, or as if money can buy anything, including her own conscience.

Besides, her own cowardice traumatizes Briony in a way. She lacks the courage for a direct confrontation with Cecilia and Robbie. The most significant difference between Briony’s true story and her novel *Atonement* appears to be her imagined meeting with Robbie and Cecilia when he comes back from France and she is working as a nurse. Briony apologizes, although she does not receive forgiveness from them. Altering the facts, Briony is again in a position of command, but she is “not so self-serving to let them [Cecilia and Robbie] forgive” (*Atonement*, 372). In the epilogue, Briony tells that she was too much of a coward to pay them a visit, since Robbie had died of septicaemia in France and Cecilia had been killed by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station in London. Briony, therefore, takes “a novelist’s license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes” (Finney, 2004: 69), since “[w]hat sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that [Cecilia and Robbie] never met again, never fulfilled their love?” (*Atonement*, 371).

Time cannot move backwards and Cecilia and Robbie are dead, so they cannot forgive Briony; it is only “through fiction itself that we can see how mistaken Briony is” (Wood, 2002:30) and it is only fiction that she can use to change the consequences of her actions. As Brian Finney claims, “[Briony’s] fictional reparation will act as an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse” (Finney, 2004: 69). That will be her attempt to atone her crime, the attempt to heal her wound: to give the lovers the happiness they deserved and give herself the peace she has been pursuing for all her life by re-writing their story, a needed condition for Briony to overcome trauma.

The reason that pushes Briony in her mature years to tell her true story is her illness: she suffers from vascular dementia<sup>3</sup>, but she wants her story to be told in detail, before she forgets the facts or the names. DeSalvo says that “when we face serious or chronic illness, disability, or dying, we are plunged into a chaotic place where nothing seems secure. We experience anguish and physical and mental suffering” (DeSalvo, 1999: 181-182). Illnesses, therefore, are “threats to the meaning we ascribe to our lives” since “the guidelines and values by which we formerly lived them can no longer help us” (ibid.). Zimmermann shares this idea and states that:

There is power in contemplating death. By doing so, we think more about how we should live our lives. We focus more on what is important to us right now. We are forced to live more in the present, reminded of the preciousness of each moment. We open our hearts as we realize that we all are literally in the same boat, headed in the same direction. Thinking about death helps clear away the cobwebs of complacency and entitlement. It moves us closer to compassion for others and for ourselves (Zimmermann, 2002: 50).

This situation makes Briony think about what she did when she was thirteen, and makes her recreate her crime (hers, Lola’s and Paul Marshall’s). Her death won’t be physical, since vascular dementia does not equate death, but for a writer like her, the impossibility of writing could represent a metaphorical death, a death of mind, pushing her to her own back room where all her missteps have been locked. This is the reason why, after “half a dozen different drafts” (*Atonement*, 369) she writes the novel that should have been her first, *Atonement*, which is, according to Brian Finney, “[Briony’s] stand against oblivion” (Finney, 2004: 68). After this final version, “[t]here [will] be no further drafts” (*Atonement*, 360).

Cecilia and Robbie are dead, and she cannot change that. It seems as if she was unable to forgive herself, or to atone for her crime because: “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her

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<sup>3</sup> “I was experiencing, he [the doctor] said, a series of tiny, nearly imperceptible strokes. The process will be slow, but my brain, my mind, is closing down. The little failures of memory that dog us all beyond a certain point will become more noticeable, more debilitating, until the time will come when I won’t notice them because I will have lost the ability to comprehend anything at all. The days of the week, the events of the morning, or even ten minutes ago, will be beyond my reach. My phone number, my address, my name and what I did with my life will be gone. In two, three, or four years’ time, I will not recognize my remaining oldest friends, and when I wake in the morning, I will not recognize that I am in my own room. And soon I won’t be, because I will need continuous care” (*Atonement*, 354).

absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? [...] No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all” (*Atonement*, 371). Sadly, the telling of her story heals her soul, although she cannot get forgiveness since Cecilia and Robbie are not alive to forgive her. The lovers, however, will survive as long as there is a single copy of *Atonement*: “a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, [...] Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It’s not impossible” (*Atonement*, 372). Thus, although she admits the real end of the story, she changes it in her novel to repair what she did when she was an innocent child.

In the end, Briony takes courage to tell her true story, and, as Zimmermann says, “courage was a greater virtue than love, since, at best, it took courage to love” (Zimmermann, 2002: 41). We can say that her attempt to atone for her crime, at least her attempt, is successful since she overcomes trauma by rewriting her story and giving a happy ending to the stories of those dead people whose lives were ruined by her.



## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this dissertation, my goal has been to explore fiction dealing with the connection between the indoctrination of young women, the traumatic consequences of this indoctrination and the healing of their traumas by creation, namely putting their sad stories into words. In order to illustrate my point I have used two case studies: Carmen Martín Gaité's alter ego C. in *The Back Room* (1978) and Ian McEwan's fictional character Briony Tallis in *Atonement* (2001), who is the one responsible for *Atonement* in the novel by McEwan.

The placing of these two case studies side by side can offer interesting comparative insights into the education given to women in Spain and England in the Twentieth century, focusing on the postwar period and the Francoist Regime in Spain (from 1939 to 1975) and on the interwar period in England (from the end of World War I in 1919 to the end of World War II in 1945). By researching into texts dealing with the education received by women living in these two countries at this time, I have concluded that their situations were not very different: relegated to the domestic sphere they were encouraged to remain *domestic angels*. These domestic angels, C. complained, did not receive sexual education, which kept them in the dark and made them misinterpret any situation dealing with sex.

This dissertation has shown the disastrous consequences of indoctrination on the lives of young and innocent Spanish and English women who received a deficient education that made them dependant beings forced into silence. I have emphasized the importance of romance fiction in the lives of C. and Briony because it was an important means to indoctrinate them. Romance fiction colored women's views of the world and their expectations, since the happy ending proposed by these narratives was always the same. Thus, romance fiction narratives, which followed a definite structure, did not challenge the situation of oppression in which women were living at that time. C. recognized how romance fiction narratives influenced her view on certain things when she was a child, although she was aware of their harmful nature to deceive readers and she did not understand why all the novels had to end when people got married. On the contrary, Briony was not so critical. She was so absorbed in her readings and writings of romance fiction narratives that she imposed

their patterns to reality. That was the reason why she misinterpreted the “facts of life” causing her to ruin her sister’s and Robbie’s happiness forever. The popular songs in postwar Spain also helped to maintain the situation of oppression with their moral, subtle messages of the unhappiness of “fallen” women who chose the wrong path in their lives, and acted in defiance of the official morality canons preached by institutions such as the *Sección Femenina*.

Opposed to this conservative romance fiction that prevented women from rebellion, we have seen that there is a “good” fiction that liberate them from their oppression and the traumatic experiences caused by a lack of education. This is the confessional fiction that C. and Briony write to liberate their souls from their pain, so we can say that they use literature to try to overcome their traumas. C. and Briony cannot escape their past, however, by inventing fiction that springs from the factuality of this past they can grow from and beyond it once it has been expressed in words to frame their own present.

Both C. and Briony need to imagine alternative worlds to the sad realities in their childhoods (war and miseducation) and they put their experiences in literature: C. escapes from the hardships of postwar Spain and Briony escapes from her isolation in a house with a broken family. As a matter of fact, C. and Briony have spent their lives telling their experiences, since they become renown writers in their mature years. Thus, they have used fiction to frame reality and literature has been a vehicle to tell their traumas. They have tried to liberate their souls from their painful memories by expressing them in words and in doing so they have also preserved them from destruction and oblivion. Thus, they have decided to confess, to liberate themselves by confession. The only difference is that Briony plays God in *Atonement* and invents a happy ending to restore a past that she cannot revert in “a final act of kindness” (*Atonement*, 372) to repair what she did and to give her sister and Robbie their happiness. She, however, confesses that the happy ending is not true and admits the ugliness of reality as it is. C. also faces up to the ugly cockroaches which represent her own oppression and sadness in the Franco years, telling at the same time the stories of an entire generation of Spanish women who were oppressed at that time.

However, with regard to C. and Briony as women who have been able to overcome their traumas by writing, I believe that it has been proved that they have healed their souls because they have learnt how to live with the painful memories of their lives after writing about them, thus, the therapeutic power of creation is evident in both cases.

As a result of the analysis it is clear that C. and Briony overcome their traumas by means of creation and learn to live their lives with the fact that sad memories are part of them. This result leads to the conclusion that the hypothesis posed at the beginning is confirmed in the scope of this dissertation. *The Back Room* and *Atonement* are remembrances of things past, of traumatic experiences that ruined C.'s and Briony's lives to some extent. The novels, however, collaborate with the idea that, if people translate their sorrows into words, a happy ending can be possible even after having experienced trauma. Thus, they transmit a message of hope and optimism because they illustrate the therapeutic power of literature, inviting readers to think that a wounded soul can be healed using words.

It is my sincere hope that this analysis of *The Back Room* and *Atonement* may be helpful for a better understanding of the ways women have overcome traumatic experiences by putting them into words and as addition to our appreciation of the sacrifice made by previous generations of women to gain rights and fight for an egalitarian education.

As regard future study, it is noticeable that not too much has been written in this piece of research about the education received by women in other works by Carmen Martín Gaité and Ian McEwan, which would require a detailed study of its own. I think that further research into the expressions of trauma in literature in English must be of interest, especially in literature written by female authors. This is a field I would like to explore in future research.



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*La Lengua de las mariposas* (1999). Director: José Luis Cuerda. Based on Manuel Rivas's novel *¿Qué me quieres amor?*(1995).

*Mona Lisa Smile* (2003). Director: Mike Newell.

*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969). Director: Ronald Neame. Based on Muriel Spark's novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961).