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TITLE: Behind the “Unspeakable” Silence: The Politics of Memory in *El silencio de las sirenas*

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the Gothic motif of the unspeakable in Adelaida García Morales’s novel *El silencio de las sirenas*. García Morales’s specific use of silence throughout this text illustrates in both literal and metaphorical form the nature of the Gothic unspeakable: that haunting, monstrous presence whose frightening memory silences its victims, who dare not vocalize their fear. Throughout *El silencio de las sirenas*, this motif serves as a metaphor for the memory politics of the post-Franco era, at which time the newly-minted government underwent a campaign to suppress traumatic memory stemming from the Civil War and the following years of dictatorship. The fear of the unspeakable is rooted in the worry that vocalization is equated with monstrous creation; that is, if one recalls the horrific scenes of the past, one risks reliving that trauma in the present. García Morales’s Gothic portrayal of the unspeakable in the small mountain village of the Alpujarras is a direct representation of those real-life anxieties plaguing Spain during the Transition period, and it demonstrates the necessity of vocalizing traumatic memories in order to rid oneself of the ghosts of the past.

KEYWORDS: Unspeakable, Gothic, Silence, Trauma, Historical Memory, Female Agency

RESUMEN: El presente ensayo examina el motivo gótico del inmenconable (unspeakable) en la novela *El silencio de las sirenas* de Adelaida García Morales. El uso específico del silencio por todo el texto demuestra en una forma tanto literal como metafórica la naturaleza del inmenconable gótico: esa presencia fantasmagórica y monstruosa cuya memoria temible silencia a sus víctimas, quienes no se atreven a vocalizar su miedo. A lo largo de *El silencio de las sirenas*, este motivo sirve como metáfora de la política de la época post-Franco, un momento en que el nuevo gobierno español estableció una campaña para reprimir la memoria traumática resultante de la Guerra Civil y los siguientes años de dictadura. El miedo del inmenconable tiene raíz en la preocupación de que la vocalización equivalga a la creación monstruosa; es decir, si uno recuerda las escenas horribas del pasado, se arriesga a vivir ese trauma de nuevo en el presente. La representación gótica que emprende García Morales del inmenconable en el pueblo pequeño de las Alpujarras es una representación directa de esas ansiedades de la vida real que acosaban a España durante el período de la Transición, y demuestra la necesidad de vocalizar las memorias traumáticas para librarse de las fantasmas del pasado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inmenconable, gótico, silencio, trauma, memoria histórica, agencia femenina

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Behind the “Unspeakable” Silence: The Politics of Memory in *El silencio de las sirenas*

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El silencio de las sirenas is by far the most studied and commented upon of García Morales' works. Since its publication 30 years ago, numerous critics have examined the novel in articles, book chapters, and dissertations. Most commonly they have focused on the image of the female characters as being voiceless within a patriarchal society, thereby drawing a connection between the title of the novel and the legend of the sirens (whose piercing cry but inability to speak has been rewritten many times by authors of numerous backgrounds, perhaps most notably in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, “The Little Mermaid”). Coro Malaxecheverría and Mercedes Mazquirán de Rodríguez interpret the siren as a symbol for these women in a traditional patriarchy, whereas Biruté Cipliauskaitė, Carmela Ferradáns, and Maureen Stanley find a subversion of traditional discourse that affords the women a certain amount of subjectivity. Other authors, such as Patrick Garlinger, Anne Hardcastle, and Jennifer Parrack, note the fantastic aspect of the novel, with Parrack in particular focusing on Elsa's perceived monstrosity and her love of the Gothic and the fantastic as the influential base of her self-identity. Currie Thompson studies the seductive but also deceiving role of vision and eyes in the novel. Katarzyna Beilin, who considers the work to be “una de las obras literarias más importantes de la España postfranquista” (39), takes a philosophical approach, analyzing the various theories about reality and subjectivity that are present in García Morales' text. Abigail Lee Six pairs the novel with Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and

examines the images of the Gothic sublime in both works. Alicia Rico, likewise, has noted that this book makes use of the Gothic “para dirigir su crítica a la sociedad actual” (167).

Although there is an unquestionable feminist influence at the root of this work, there are also other social and political issues that prior criticism has not yet uncovered and which García Morales particularly develops in her construction of memory and silence in *El silencio de las sirenas*. The present essay, therefore, will study the use of silence and its connection with the historical trauma that is the background of the novel. We will focus upon Elsa in particular as a character who oversteps the boundaries between the real and the fantastic, invoking the image of monstrosity through her symbolic state as a mythical siren. In *El silencio de las sirenas*, the problematic rendering of memory as belonging to an alternative reality (in Elsa's case, her illusion—or delusion—about her lover, Agustín) serves as the gateway to the “unspeakable,” which conceals the truth by confusing past realities with present fictions. This essay will demonstrate that the traditional Gothic convention of the unspeakable is still applicable today in García Morales' novel, and that it allows the reader to understand how silence is a tool used to avoid memory of the past—used to prevent the “unspeakable” from becoming an active, physical presence in a community that would rather forget than mentally relive its own history. By basing the sociopolitical commentary on references that Matilde makes to war, death, and starvation, we will conclude that the “unspeakable” in

this novel represents the burgeoning transition-period consciousness of past trauma during the Franco dictatorship, while at the same time demonstrating women's ability to speak in alternative methods. Much like the sirens of Kafka's mythical recreation, whose silence is their most powerful tool (a link drawn in the title of García Morales' novel), the female protagonists of *El silencio de las sirenas* utilize silence, fantasy, and literary creation to regain their symbolic voices in an effort to recover repressed memories and to heal from past traumas.

Gothic and the Fantastic

García Morales wastes no time in establishing her fictional setting through a Gothic lens. The town—small and isolated in Las Alpujarras—leaves María with a strange feeling of other-worldliness from her very first impression onward: “tuve la impresión de cruzar una frontera precisa y de penetrar en un mundo extraño que se volvía hacia sí mismo, encerrado en una quietud intemporal” (14). María's sense that she has entered a different world defines the tone for the rest of the narrative, thus allowing the characters as well as the landscape to be portrayed in a supernatural manner. In fact, the narrator's first encounter with the townspeople underscores the impression of the alien nature of this new world: “Eran seres extraños que parecían habitar en la linde misma entre la muerte y la vida” (17). In these scenes García Morales purposely resists referring to the inhabitants as explicitly human, instead choosing to portray them as creatures from a supernatural world that is outside María's realm of experience. Her depiction of these people as inhabiting the boundary between life and death again draws attention to García Morales' Gothic sensibilities and allows her to insinuate, already within the first few pages of the novel, the underlying presence of death. She even takes advantage of the initial pages

to insert a rather explicit social commentary, as María walks around the town and sees the people for the first time, she notes:

el dolor de muchas separaciones, el dolor de un pueblo que agoniza. Y empiezas a ver la enfermedad por todas partes, enfermedad que aquí no se cura porque no hay dinero para prolongar las vidas inútiles. (16)

The strange, seemingly subhuman creatures that inhabit the Alpujarras are, for García Morales, a representation of the poor in Spain. The separations that she mentions in this passage are directly related to the Civil War, which has left the town almost entirely to the women whose husbands, sons, and brothers have been killed. The lack of a masculine presence in the village is a key aspect of the beginning scene of the novel because it allows us to make an immediate connection between historical trauma and the present, otherworldly state of the town and its citizens. By opening her novel in a manner that explicitly calls attention to the supernatural character of the principal setting, García Morales employs the Gothic genre as a mediating device for delivering what will become her overarching social commentary in *El silencio de las sirenas*.

Within the Gothic structure of *El silencio de las sirenas* lies another important aspect of the novel: its reliance on and use of the fantastic. The most widely recognized theory of the fantastic is attributed to Tzvetan Todorov, whose *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) has become a point of reference for almost all studies of fantastic literature. According to his theory, one of the most crucial elements of the fantastic is the vacillation between belief and disbelief—between reality and illusion. He explains:

Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement qui ne peut

s'expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier [...]. Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel. (29)

The inability to separate the real world from the supernatural by using natural law is a key aspect of the fantastic that Todorov repeatedly emphasizes throughout his book. García Morales' literature often makes use of the fantastic in a way that quite closely resembles Todorov's description: her worlds are, indeed, based on the natural, human world, and yet they all contain certain elements that seem out of place—characters or events that appear to live and occur outside the confines of ordinary reality. In the case of *El silencio de las sirenas*, we can highlight various elements that have a fantastic effect on the narrative: phantom-like women, belief in superstition and use of magic, and even, as Hardcastle notes, “the suspension of time and the conflation of past, present and future” (180). Interestingly, these are all elements that can also be considered part of the Gothic aspect of García Morales' narrative; although most critics choose to focus solely on the fantastic nature of the text, here we see the intimate connection between the two narrative styles, which allows us to understand the fantastic to be an integral part of the Gothic novel.

Scholars of the Gothic novel have studied the close association between the Gothic and the fantastic for many years. José Monleón clearly defines the relationship between the fantastic and the Gothic in his introductory chapter, in which he discusses the presence of supernatural events in both *The Castle of Otranto* and *Vathek* and notes:

The Gothic was born out of the interaction, in one space, of two opposed and irreconcilable worldviews; it came into being as the result of the tensions produced by the inclusion of medieval beliefs within the reasonable framework of eighteenth-century bourgeois

precepts. The Gothic was, therefore, an artistic antinomy, a paradox at the level of representation that challenged the principles of modern art and, therefore, of modern society. The fantastic was thus born, and from this moment its history and characteristics would be determined by the constant shifting of the diffuse boundaries between reason and unreason. (6)

According to Monleón, there is a natural relationship between the Gothic and the fantastic that allows the latter to become a viable—and common—part of the former. The fantastic, like the Gothic, challenges traditional thought and, therefore, allows a certain amount of transgression. This tension between the traditional and the unacceptable is strengthened by the use of the fantastic and its inherent ability to make readers question their understanding of reality.

García Morales creates a Gothic mood by altering the image of her female characters: they constantly shift back and forth between being superstitious women and phantasmagoric creatures who appear to inhabit another realm. The narrator's perception of her environment thus depends on the fantastic and its relationship with the tenuous reality around her. María watches “esas viejas que se deslizaban, fantasmales y sombrías, envueltas en sus mantos negros” (45). Here the combination of a certain reality—that of elderly women in mourning—with a questionable fantasy—an impression of the same women as phantoms gliding eerily through the town's darkened streets—calls into question the women's true nature. In Todorov's theory of the fantastic, the vacillation of not just the reader but also the main character is crucial. Throughout the novel we witness María's incessant hesitation and fluctuation between belief and disbelief: while on the one hand she wants to believe that there is nothing out of the ordinary in her new place of residence, she cannot help but hold in suspicion the people and the environment around her.

The presence of phantasmagoric elements within the Gothic structure of the novel is one of the main motifs that García Morales uses to introduce the problematic notion of reality into her text. The elderly women are not the only phantomlike presence in the tiny village: like the native townspeople themselves, Elsa and her love interest, Agustín, begin to develop a ghostly appearance. As Elsa's hope of reuniting with Agustín slowly fades, her connection with reality becomes increasingly problematic, and a direct correlation develops between Agustín's phantomlike image and Elsa's imminent entrance into a fantastic, imagined world. For this reason, María describes Elsa's exaggerated love as "una historia fantasma que parecía haber sucedido, o que podría suceder, en un tiempo mítico, en un espacio otro" (78). The narrator considers her friend's idealized romance to belong to the fantastic realm, beyond the borders of the "true" reality. Despite María's chastising of her unrealistic expectations, however, Elsa continues to seek comfort in her fantasy world and eventually even considers herself to be "un fantasma vagando perdido, buscando tu sombra que se había convertido en mi única realidad" (82). In this manner, we witness the detachment of Elsa's present reality. As a self-described phantom—that is, as a person without an identifiable connection to the physical world around her—she can only understand and experience her surroundings through perceived phantasmagoric influence: Agustín's residual presence, which she now interprets as a spiritual phenomenon.

Once Elsa has entirely entered the fantastic world of her own creation, her former internal self and her present external (physical) self cease to exist. Emotionally she is completely separated from the rest of the townspeople, including María, and her prompt death on the side of the mountain completes her conversion into a spiritual presence. To this extent, the phantasmagoric aspect of the fantastic allows us to understand the motives behind Elsa's

retreat into her illusionary world, and it again draws attention to the continued vacillation between reality and fantasy that both the reader and María experience throughout the novel. In this regard, Elsa's plight and eventual death represent the problematic struggle for individual autonomy faced by all the women of the town. Together, they inhabit a world in which the supernatural has taken complete control over everyday reality. Within such an environment, the women are unable to find their own unique voices because they are constantly suppressed by the entrance of the fantastic, which transgresses reality and discourages the villagers from fostering a collective memory that is true to the past.

Superstition, a common element in Gothic fiction, is another vital component of the fantastic mood in *El silencio de las sirenas* that blurs the boundaries between the real and the supernatural and permits a more profound understanding of the characters' psychological condition. According to Anne McWhir:

This separation of belief from fact is reflected in the Gothic novel, where the realm of superstition—containing not only obvious absurdities but also legend, anecdote and tradition, nightmare and repressed desire—becomes a vast image for the darkness and mystery of inner experience. (qtd. in Graham 31)

Similarly, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum claims:

In that superstitions are projections of fundamental psychological phenomena, Gothicism directs our attention to the internal world of the mind. The characters in Gothic novels are usually hyper-self-conscious. (38)

As McWhir and Bayer-Berenbaum have aptly noted, the use of superstition in Gothic fiction allows the reader to have a much more intimate perspective on the characters' psychological processes.

García Morales' incorporation of the "evil eye" superstition in her novel underscores once more the Gothic fantastic influence in her narrative: the terror that the condition induces is balanced to a certain degree by the absolute seriousness with which the seemingly supernatural ceremony is treated. Matilde, in particular, is a character defined by her sense of superstition and her implementation of magic rituals to cure certain ailments like the evil eye. María, however, vacillates between belief and disbelief as she experiences the ritual, eventually deciding that there must be some kind of truth behind the superstition:

por primera vez pensé que el mal de ojo tenía que ser algo: un gesto misterioso del alma [...] una vibración maligna que se escapa [...] una palabra cargada de odio [...]. No sabía qué explicación se podría dar a aquello que mantenía a esos aldeanos religiosamente unidos en un rito que sólo la cabra y yo parecíamos no comprender. (25)

Her need to define the evil eye and to seek some sort of explanation for it exposes the fantastic nature of the ritual and of the ailment itself. Since this is an established superstition among the townspeople, only María—the outsider—requires reassurance while facing such a supernatural experience. The ritual itself serves to fortify the role of superstition in the small community's construction of reality. Each time this ceremony is repeated, it further reduces the possibility of the villagers' escape from the confines of the supernatural. The more dependent the women are on superstition and the fantastic, the less likely they become to see and understand the world around them through the unobfuscated lens of historical reality.

As a story teller, Matilde further demonstrates the importance of the supernatural to the townspeople by relating tales that connect the past to the timeless realm of superstitious fantasy. In this manner, Matilde continues to foster the pervading presence of

the fantastic in the town's everyday life, and she allows this presence to extend itself to the lives of the townspeople's ancestors. When she narrates her father's fantastic encounter with magical beings that guard Moorish treasure in an underground hiding place, Matilde indirectly highlights the town's traditional acceptance of superstition as a normal aspect of everyday life in both the past and the present. María enjoys listening to the story because it gives her a unique perspective not just on Matilde, but also on the town itself:

A veces escuchar a Matilde era ir aprendiendo la historia de la aldea, la de sus antepasados, la que ellos habían creído vivir. Era una historia manejada, en parte, por seres imaginarios y crueles que parecían divertirse jugando con las desgracias de estos aldeanos. (34)

María understands superstition to be a unique aspect of the townspeople's cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the narrator's refusal to accept as fact the history presented to her—denoted in her characterization of the past as one that the villagers had *believed* to have lived—indicates precisely her perspective as an outsider, and further corroborates the otherworldliness of the townspeople and their traditions. Therefore, María's description of the town's historical past, as it is presented to her in Matilde's tales, relies on the notion of imaginary beings who must, in some cruel way, be responsible for the (re)creation of the villagers' history. By depicting the town's collective memory in this manner—as if it were a victim of supernatural mischief—María emphasizes once more the rather tenuous balance between reality and fantasy in the Alpujarras.

García Morales' anthropological approach to the fantastic in this particular instance underscores her primary motive for using these Gothic motifs: to expose the *real* history that lies at the root of the supernatural. Salvador Cardús i Ros explains this phenomenon in terms of collective memory:

Social or collective memory designates the set of narratives that are hegemonic in a specific group and that refer to and deal with the present as experienced by a differentiated community. (qtd. in Resina 23)

In the case of *El silencio de las sirenas*, this specific social group is the elderly villagers whose set of narratives—their superstitious beliefs and the generational inheritance of folk legends which make up their collective memory—redefines their experience with the present reality by masking (in supernatural form) past historical trauma. In fact, Matilde draws attention to this point in an indirect manner when she finishes the story about her father by describing her perspective on death:

aquí en estas montañas, la muerte es lo sagrado. Siempre tiene un rostro, un nombre, una historia [...]. Las voces de los muertos nunca se olvidan. Ellos jamás se alejan del todo. Y no hay por estas tierras más dioses, ni más santos que ellos: las ánimas. (35)

By acknowledging the inevitable presence of spirits in the village, Matilde deliberately connects the realm of the living with the realm of the dead in real, natural terms. She accepts the phantasmagoric presence in her life as a reminder of the past and of the people she once knew. It is, therefore, due to her intimate, unabashed connection with the fantastic that Matilde perhaps ironically becomes one of the key characters who defines our sense of the real.

Reality Versus Illusion, and the Door to the Unspeakable

The Gothic fantastic base of *El silencio de las sirenas* creates an exemplary atmosphere for the inclusion of the unspeakable and its relation to the supernatural realm. In order to understand what is, in fact, *real* in this novel we must closely examine instances throughout the text of fantastic occurrences,

illusions and, more importantly, silence. The novel's blending of reality with illusion is one of the primary aspects that critics have studied, but up to the present no one has investigated the influence of silence and the unspeakable on the portrayal of reality in García Morales' work. What we will see is that the unspeakable plays a central role in the novel's sociopolitical commentary and, to a large extent, facilitates the extracting of historical reality from the depths of the Gothic narrative.

Elsa is the central figure in the novel around whom images of reality and illusion constantly converge. She is also the character who seems least able to separate fantasy from her everyday reality. María notes: "La palabra 'realidad' inquietaba a Elsa [...]. Tenía el poder de producirla una desagradable desazón. Quizá le sugiriera algo demasiado vago, ambiguo, inaprehensible" (77). Instead of facing her relationship problems in a straightforward manner, Elsa prefers to create and immerse herself in her own fantasy world. For her the word "reality" signifies the dark truth—the unspeakable. If she must live in a logical, realistic world according to the standards of those around her (primarily María), she will have to face the painful fact that Agustín no longer loves her nor needs her in his life. Elsa's battle with the "real" world thus symbolizes the role of the unspeakable in Spanish society during and after Franco's regime, in the sense that the unspeakable aids in erasing—or, at the very least, burying—collective memory.

In Eve Sedgwick's study of Gothic conventions, she notes that "the unspeakable" appears on almost every page of traditional Gothic fiction (14). Sedgwick means this quite literally: in classic English Gothic literature, words like "unspeakable" and "unutterable" appear very frequently in dialogue as signifiers of terror. To the contrary, in García Morales' novel, the unspeakable is implied, and the book is filled with silences of many kinds, almost all of which are related either directly or indirectly to the supernatural. According to Sedgwick:

the unspeakable has two functions in the emotional economy. In the first place it is a concomitant of other sufferings [...]. At the same time, though, it is itself a cause of suffering the most intense. (66-67)

If we apply this emotional effect of the unspeakable to *El silencio de las sirenas*, we note that Elsa is a strong candidate on whom to base a study of the conjunction of the unspeakable and the fantastic. Elsa's insistence on the power of superstition (in both the town's traditional beliefs and her faith in hypnosis) coincides with an overwhelming silence that permeates the novel. This technique has been used by Gothic authors like Ann Radcliffe, who took advantage of what Varma calls "dreadful silence" (88) and who also:

approached the terrible [...] by working upon the sensations of natural and superstitious fear and making artistic use of obscurity and suspense, which remain the most fertile sources of sublime emotion. (102)

García Morales uses these same techniques for a similar effect. Her inclusion of superstition, and of the interplay between the natural and the supernatural, creates a certain amount of suspense throughout the novel and, as Lee Six has highlighted in her chapter on *El silencio de las sirenas*, it also produces a sublime effect that is experienced by both the characters and the reader.

Although in this novel García Morales does not include an explicit mention of words like "unspeakable" (which Sedgwick finds throughout British Gothic fiction), she does implicitly use the Gothic unspeakable by creating an atmosphere that is undeniably marked by silence. In fact, the very first description of the mountain village emphasizes the incredible silence there: "A medida que iba subiendo crecía la intensidad del silencio que silbaba en mis oídos" (14). This passage is a key to understanding the use of silence in the novel: paradoxically, the silence in this town

"whistles" in the narrator's ears and "grows in intensity" as she ascends to a higher altitude. Later on, during the evil eye ceremony, María describes the silence as one that "penetró en aquella habitación" (25). Such passages demonstrate that García Morales includes silence in her novel as an actual, audible presence—quite the opposite of the normal notion of silence as being a lack of sound. If we recall the manner in which Sedgwick describes the effects of the unspeakable, we can note similar effects in García Morales' novel: in British Gothic fiction, the characters actually pronounce the words "unspeakable" and "unutterable" as a vocalized, audible substitute for words that they cannot say due to fear from past trauma and to their belief that giving a name to the unspeakable (actually vocalizing the words they refuse to say) will thus give it dangerous power to mobilize and act against them. This inherent paradox—the fact that, in both cases, the "unspeakable" is, actually, pronounceable and audible—underscores the importance of silence in García Morales' novel. The repeated mention of it throughout her text—in addition to the novel's title alone—indicates its key role as a symbolic device that requires further investigation.

Directly related to the Gothic notion of the unspeakable, silence in *El silencio de las sirenas* symbolizes the historical trauma that began with the Spanish Civil War and continued during the Transition, at the time of García Morales' writing. The vast majority of silences in the novel occurs, ironically, during periods of conversation among the women, mostly between María, Elsa, and Matilde. García Morales repeatedly emphasizes the difficulty that María experiences in attempting to maintain conversations with Elsa and/or Matilde without these women lapsing into silence. Considered as a whole, the descriptions of conversation throughout the novel would seem to imply that the female inhabitants of the town spend most of their time together without speaking to each other. Matilde, for instance, seems to possess:

una extraordinaria habilidad para sentirse invisible y para esconderse tras prolongados silencios, como si no fuera necesario decir algo por el mero hecho de encontrarse junto a otras personas. (71)

This is a telling portrait of Matilde as a representative of the native townspeople: the fact that she seems to act indifferently to the physical presence of others indicates that the village itself is comprised of disconnected, wandering souls. Moreover, her tendency to make herself feel invisible and to hide herself behind silences once again draws attention to the phantasmagoric undertones of the text which, in turn, recalls Elsa's own self-description as a "lost ghost" that we have seen earlier. The detachment of these women in the face of interpersonal relationships is part of a cycle that starts with historical trauma: once the pain becomes too much to bear, the women try to erase it from their memories by not speaking about it, thus erroneously subscribing to the belief that that which has no name can do no harm—the primary deceptive factor behind the Gothic unspeakable. However, the overwhelming presence of silence in the town points to the haunting effects the unspeakable has upon the women, and their insistent denial of memory correlates with the ever-strengthening force of the unspeakable that they are trying to suppress.

If we consider the historical period during which García Morales was writing this novel—the Spanish Transition to democracy—we can understand the unspeakable here as a symbol for the systematic erasure of memory on the part of the state after Franco's death. As Gregorio Morán notes:

Apelar a la memoria histórica, desde el momento en que no había colectivo memorizador, podía considerarse una muestra de ambiciones desestabilizadoras o asociales, inquietantes para el precario equilibrio de una democracia frágil. (76)

This quotation assists in illustrating how the underlying process in García Morales' novel is the same: speaking (in this case, recalling the past) threatens the peaceful way of life of the Spanish citizens—in the historical sense, threatening the success of the new democratic process—and thus silence, the repression of memory, is employed as a method of recovery. The problem with this process is that neither the government, through its propagandistic "pacto del olvido" campaign in the post-Franco era, nor the elderly women's silence in Las Alpujarras, can completely erase collective memory. The unspeakable, therefore, becomes yet another form of the ghosts of the past that haunt those living in the present.

Elsa also embodies a kind of physical presence that is haunted by the unspeakable, and her understanding of this condition—which manifests itself in the traditional image of the siren—as well as her method of dealing with it, is another important aspect of the text. The most frequently commented image in this novel is that of the siren, which most critics agree is a symbol for Elsa and her complicated quest to find love. According to Greek legend, the siren has a beautiful song that seduces men (generally sailors) and lures them to shipwreck and death. Elsa, whose rather overzealous approach to her relationship with Agustín eventually turns him away from her, is compared to these mythic creatures throughout the novel. In one telling scene, as Agustín slowly begins to pull away, Elsa screams: "¡Yo soy normal! [...] ¡No soy un monstruo! ¡No soy un monstruo!" (62). In the diary passage that immediately follows this vocal outburst, Elsa writes:

No sabes cómo llegué a percibirme a mí misma en aquellos momentos. Yo era algo informe, repugnante, era un pozo repleto de horrores y amenazas contra mí. Era la monstruosidad misma. (63)

Here Elsa clearly defines herself as a “monster,” and from the clues that García Morales has given us we can infer that this monstrosity comes in the form of the siren. Elsa’s need to reaffirm her human nature by denying the monstrous in her initial outburst indicates that she, in fact, believes that this monstrosity exists within her—a conclusion that is later confirmed in her own diary entry. Likewise, Elsa blames her inability to successfully establish a romantic relationship with Agustín on her inner monstrosity: if Agustín rejects her, it must—according to her logic—be due to her monstrous nature (that is, her lack of traditional femininity). If we compare this situation with that of the sirens, we can note a similarity: in both cases, the female monstrosity ultimately destroys the men who come into contact with it. Of course, Elsa’s case is not quite so literal, since Agustín himself does not die, but their relationship suffers a similar fate, for it is gradually extinguished. Moreover, the connection with the unspeakable is an important factor in Elsa’s monstrosity: given that the siren’s song kills her lovers, everything in Elsa’s experience indicates that she needs to silence herself in order to maintain her relationship, thus reaffirming the notion that speaking out is detrimental to women who perform within the politically—and socially—constrained environment of the post-war period.

Elsa attempts to eradicate her siren-like monstrosity through the power of hypnosis, which becomes a highly problematized process of trying to extract reality from fantasy. Her superstitious belief in hypnosis allows her to fully immerse herself in her (sub)conscious fantasies while María pretends to hypnotize her. The principal purpose of Elsa’s hypnosis is to extract “lost” memories—which represent the unspeakable in Elsa’s subconscious—that have appeared to her in dreams. If the unspeakable can, indeed, be reached through hypnosis, then Elsa might be able to regain her true sense of self and reality. In one session, María describes her reaction to the process and her impression of

Elsa as she creates “una atmósfera en la que nada parecía existir fuera de las realidades que iba convocando con sus palabras. La vi tan sumida en aquella historia, creando para ella tanta realidad” (66). These sessions afford Elsa the freedom to explore, uninhibited, the depths of her subconscious and to recreate her fantasy world in words, converting the unspeakable once again into a vocalized, audible presence.

As the sessions become longer and more intense, there is also a notable increase in the number of silences that mark the transition from one memory to the next. María describes these moments as “un silencio abrumador” (107), “largos minutos de silencio” (108) and “silencio [...] más prolongado” (111). Their final session ends with *complete* silence, as Elsa’s lips continue to move even though she is unable to make any sound: “sus labios se movían como si articularan palabras inaudibles, como si su voz resonara en un lugar inaccesible para mí” (128). Here we must note that Elsa’s sudden inability to produce sound is directly correlated to the extraction of the unspeakable from her subconscious memory: as the trauma of these memories resurfaces, Elsa’s immediate reaction is to stop the flow of words—to deny to them, access to her present reality. In this manner, she embodies the kind of state-induced repression of collective memory that we have already discussed. By refusing to continue the process of unburying the past, Elsa effectively suppresses once more the symbolic historical trauma, thereby permanently relegating it to its Gothic condition as the unspeakable and giving to the fantastic ultimate authority over her life.

What Happens When the Siren Speaks?

In Greek mythology and later folklore the siren’s song is a powerful, destructive force. García Morales employs the symbol of the siren throughout *El silencio de las sirenas* in a way that articulates the relationship between

silence and the Gothic unspeakable. The novel portrays many different kinds of silence—some inaudible, others more in conjunction with Sedgwick's paradoxical version of the unspeakable as a vocally expressed concept that masks an underlying fear or anxiety—but all of its silences highlight the notion of speaking as a transgressive act. Within the context of the Transition period, silence in this novel represents the new Spanish government's project to repress collective memory of national trauma under Franco's dictatorship. Nevertheless, this project is itself challenged throughout the text during moments in which the "sirens" (Elsa, Matilde, and María) sing their metaphorical song by recalling their own repressed memories. Each woman performs this transgressive act in a unique manner, some more forceful than others.

Elsa's convoluted sense of reality necessitates a rather invasive psychological procedure (hypnosis) in order to extract fragments of history from her otherwise fictional world. Instead of helping her to heal from emotional damage, however, the hypnosis appears to intensify Elsa's anguish and lead her into a state of depression. The resulting emotional effects of this procedure mimic, to a certain degree, the psychological state of Spanish society during the Transition. In his book on the Transition, Alberto Medina Domínguez makes comments on the state of melancholy in post-Franco Spain that recall with great similitude Elsa's particular emotional state:

el melancólico lleva a cabo un vaciamiento de sí, se convierte en un lugar de falta, un blanco que hay que llenar. La muerte del otro, en cuanto réplica narcisista del yo, transforma a éste en un vacío sin identidad. Ese proceso de autovaciamiento sería acompañado a su vez de un 'placentero autocastigo' a través del cual el melancólico se inflige a sí mismo los castigos producto del resentimiento dirigidos al otro por su ausencia. (28)

In correlation with this commentary on the loss of identity leading to self-punishment, Elsa's diary entries and her letters to Agustín corroborate the mental and emotional anguish that she suffers on a daily basis and also demonstrate her increasing need to envelop herself in fantasy as a method of escaping reality. The outwardly visible signs of this emotional trauma mimic the kind of national melancholy that Medina Domínguez claims to be a result of the transitional period and the aftermath of Franco's dictatorship. As the nation had, for so long, defined itself in terms of the sociopolitical situation in which its inhabitants were forced to live, with the image of Franco constantly at the root of their self-identity, so, too, does Elsa create her own self-concept: by symbolically forging her life around the image of a man whose actions demonstrate that this relationship is neither entirely reciprocal nor in her own best interest.

Unlike the above quotation from Medina-Domínguez, in Elsa's case there is not a physical death of the Other, but rather a spiritual death: her relationship with Agustín is severed and, since she no longer has this love with which to perceive herself, she becomes vacant and undefinable. Once she is no longer able to write letters to him, Elsa rapidly deteriorates physically and emotionally. Ferradán comes to a similar conclusion:

El escribir se plantea como una forma de vida a través y para el Otro; cuando Elsa se da cuenta de que el Otro no existe se acaba esa posibilidad [...] es el reconocimiento de que para que tal unión sea posible, el yo como tal entidad limitada, ha de desaparecer en el otro. (481)

The absence of the Other (Agustín) makes emotional recovery impossible for Elsa. Her own self-concept is so fully dependent on her state of being in a relationship, that, once the relationship ends, she cannot come to terms with this dissolution of (what she perceives

to be) a part of herself. More importantly, the end of her letter-writing marks a loss of voice: once she can no longer express herself through her writing, she shuts down emotionally and physically, rarely speaking and barely able to function. Since her hypnosis sessions with María have ceased (due to her own will), Elsa does not have even the opportunity to communicate through fantasy. By the end of the novel, she is completely silenced.

Once she has lost her voice, Elsa seems to believe that her only option is to die on the side of the mountain. The location she chooses for her suicide is—just as she herself—marked by silence: Elsa tells María that “el silencio de la nieve era más intenso que cualquier pensamiento o sentimiento. Y sumergirse en aquella inmovilidad era como salirse de los límites del cuerpo, ser quietud, blancura, silencio” (163-64). Again we note the intensity of the silence surrounding the village in the mountains: here silence is more powerful even than thoughts and feelings—precisely what Elsa needs to drown out the overwhelming presence of the unspeakable. Her desire to not just experience this totalizing silence, but to actually *become* silence itself, demonstrates the effect of the unspeakable (the past trauma) on her present life. In its paradoxical state as a vocalized presence, the unspeakable works to slowly destroy Elsa’s sense of self and purpose. She thus uses the fantastic as a defense mechanism, and shields herself from the torturous blows of the unspeakable’s traumatic presence in her everyday reality. On the mountain, the absolute silence provides Elsa with a proverbial clean slate: she no longer feels pressured to vocalize her past trauma, because the overwhelming silence frees her subconscious mind from all thoughts and emotions. In fact, when María finally discovers Elsa’s body on the mountainside, she describes her as “sobrecogida por el poderoso silencio de las montañas y de la muerte” (165). Through her suicide in this quiet location, Elsa experiences the convergence of silence and death and puts the unspeakable to rest one last time.

Matilde also feels this same desire for overpowering silence in her daily life, as she battles the supernatural presence of what she calls “los miedos.” She explains that they are the souls of the deceased who continue to populate the mountain village and that “[h]abía tantos, que no les dejaban dormir por las noches” (88). Matilde’s manner of speaking about these spirits as if they were a natural—rather than a supernatural—presence defines her vision of reality, and it also allows María to access Matilde’s own thoughts about and ways of dealing with the unspeakable. The spirits’ presence is obviously somewhat frightening to Matilde, but—as María learns—the elderly woman has lived her entire life with it and has adapted to the pain it causes her. While Matilde recalls her past, María notes:

Comprendí que estaba decidida a soportar el dolor sin hacer nada para aligerarlo [...]. Comenzó entonces a contarme, con los ojos entrecerrados y con una expresión de embotamiento en su rostro, olvidándose poco a poco de su propio dolor, cómo ‘antes’ sí que había enfermedades y horrores que ya, afortunadamente, no se volverían a conocer. (89)

Matilde’s interaction with the past occurs during these moments of storytelling, when she relives—through her own words—the atrocities of the war and its aftermath. She specifically separates painful memories from her present reality by relegating them to a distinct realm: “antes.” Matilde’s assertion that these horrors will not return is evidence that she understands, to a certain extent, the power of vocalization and its ability to lessen the negative effects of the unspeakable in her present life.

As Matilde tells the narrator about a horrible outbreak of cholera (which, historically, occurred at the time of the Spanish Civil War), the physical toll of unburying the past—the unspeakable—is evident. This deceptively simple act of remembering requires

a great deal of physical and emotional energy on the part of the widow, and it is through Matilde's stories that García Morales connects her Gothic atmosphere with actual Spanish history. One of the most atrocious memories that Matilde is able to recall is the burying of the not-yet dead during the cholera epidemic, and she remembers with horror the government's role:

las autoridades habían determinado enterrar a los moribundos en el primer descuido o desmayo que tuvieran. Estaban convencidos de que con esa medida, muriendo ya bajo tierra los afectados por el cólera, el contagio amainaría. (90)

The reaction of the authorities to the epidemic in this novel foreshadows, to a certain extent, their reaction to the death of Franco and the process toward the Transition in actual Spanish history: in both cases, there is a clear avoidance of the principal source of horror (the political cause of the situation), which is buried—in this scene quite literally—in order to facilitate the “healing” process. This passage is vital because it demonstrates very effectively the thought process of the federal authorities: once the symptoms (those infected with cholera in Matilde's past, or the nation-wide feelings of melancholy and depression during the transitional period) are buried, the primary cause of these symptoms (in both cases, the war and Franco's regime) will be overlooked and, eventually, forgotten. However, this project is not entirely successful, because memories of traumatic events can never be fully eradicated from the national consciousness. Matilde is a prime example of the unspeakable's inherent, ongoing presence in the Spanish community:

Matilde narraba estos infortunios mirando absorta, perdida en un tiempo que la había aterrorizado y que parecía no haberse ido aún del todo. Era un ‘antes’ cristalizado y que ya formaba parte de su presente. (90)

María notices that Matilde still—decades later—is intimately aware of the power of the past in her present life. The elderly woman seems, in fact, to be lost in that time period which has, from the beginning, remained forever static in the collective memory. With these passages from Matilde's story, García Morales precisely details the government's failed project to suppress the unspeakable in both literal and figurative terms, thus demonstrating the unspeakable to be an active, ongoing presence in the lives of the transitional generation.

María's siren song manifests itself primarily through her narration of the novel. As an outsider to the mountain village, she enters the community without the influence of generations of superstitious traditions. This therefore allows her a certain amount of skepticism in the presence of the supernatural figures and rituals that she encounters. María's own voice actually is not vitally important to the overall structure of the novel; instead, her ability to piece together the stories and memories she has collected from the other women's lives is what drives the focal point of the text. In her article on hauntology, Jo Labanyi discusses a similar act of collecting history and memory, using Benjamin's perspective:

Walter Benjamin has described the historian as collector or bricoleur, in the sense that he or she rummages around in the debris or litter left by the past, and reassembles the fragments in a new ‘constellation’ that permits the articulation of that which has been left unvoiced. (Resina 69)

We can apply this concept to the work that María does as she assembles and recounts the stories of the women in Las Alpujarras. She is, in this sense, a historian: she collects the artifacts that Elsa has left behind and combines them with Matilde's memories of traumatic historical events in order to compile and create an overarching dialogue about memory, history, and the perception of reality in 20th-century Spain. Her ability to write—to project

her voice on paper (which, as we have noted earlier from a male perspective, is a slightly less threatening form of feminine vocal projection)—is what ultimately gives a voice to Elsa and Matilde, who would otherwise remain silent. María's literary creation, therefore, affords each of these women a certain amount of freedom of expression by allowing their voices—their stories—to live on in textual form.

Conclusion

In one sense, *El silencio de las sirenas* is a rather self-aware text. By choosing the Gothic mode for her narrative, García Morales creates a literary space for confrontation with the sociopolitical concerns of the public as well as with her own. Through her depiction of Elsa's traumatic love story, Matilde's horrific past, and María's ability to bring their stories together, García Morales gives a voice to those who are normally unable to speak—or, in the mythical siren's case, to "sing." Mazquirán de Rodríguez remarks:

If patriarchy renders the woman's voice—as the voices of the Sirens—in-audible, the written word, equivalent to the silent song of Kafka's sirens, is the device used here to make man's (Ulysses' and Agustín's) triumph obsolete. (479)

Likewise, Stanley comments: "The mythic recasting allows silenced female figures to speak for themselves and shed the monstrous images forced onto them" (248). What both critics have noted is the reclaiming of the female voice through the power of literary production. To this extent, García Morales herself is represented in the figure of María as the Benjaminian historian who collects fragments of the past and pieces them together in order to tell the story of the voiceless.

In *El silencio de las sirenas*, García Morales draws attention to the female voice within the Gothic mode and manipulates to her own advantage the transgressive nature of

the Gothic as a way to achieve subjectivity for herself (as the female author) and for her characters (as a subverted image of the mythical sirens). In fact, García Morales' authority within the Gothic mode parallels the original work of Ann Radcliffe. As Coral Ann Howells notes:

if women in the texts are silenced, the voice of the woman novelist is not, and it is in her claims for the imaginative freedom of the artist that Ann Radcliffe most energetically inscribes her transgressions of literary and gender boundaries. (qtd. in Graham 158)

What Radcliffe did for women authors in the 18th-century Gothic, García Morales does with her literature in the 20th century: both women achieve authority—subjectivity—for themselves and for their female characters through their employment of the Gothic mode's transgressive nature.

In addition to the novel's obvious feminist undertones, we must recognize the other vital aspect of García Morales' social criticism in *El silencio de las sirenas*, which is directly related to the unspeakable. As we have seen, the portrayal of the fantastic—superstitions, phantasmagoric apparitions and magic—combines with the Gothic notion of the unspeakable in a manner that highlights the novel's political nature. Elsa's sessions with hypnosis and Matilde's horrific stories are García Morales' primary tools for employing the unspeakable throughout her text. The fantastic in *El silencio de las sirenas* exists in order to mask the traumatic past that its women characters have suffered. In Matilde's case, the supernatural helps her to explain and to live with the metaphorical "ghosts of the past." For Elsa, her hypnosis sessions with María allow the past to exist as a separate, fantastic realm that she can create and manipulate according to her present desires. In both cases, the unspeakable emerges as an overpowering and, paradoxically, pronounceable presence in the women's current reality.

By creating this balance between the real and the supernatural, which hinges on

the existence of the unspeakable, García Morales inserts her own sociopolitical commentary. Although her protagonists live in a fictional world and subscribe to rather superstitious beliefs, the author untiringly draws connections between the fantastic world of her literary creation and the contemporary world in which she, herself, was living at the time of writing: that of the Spanish Transition, which—as we have seen—was similarly haunted by the presence of the unspeakable. The aftermath of the dictatorship and of the death of Franco himself created a scenario in which the government—forced to deal with the loss on a national scale—decided to campaign with the propagandistic suppression of memories as a way to reconstruct the national identity in post-Franco Spain. What the government did not anticipate, however, was the difficulty of the task of changing and/or erasing the almost forty years of history from the national consciousness. García Morales exposes the impossibility of eradicating the traumatic past in her portrayal of Matilde and Elsa: they are two women who have experienced and dealt with trauma in distinct ways, but who both continue to suffer from the painful memories of the unspeakable in the present. The historical parallel is clear: the trauma resulting from the Spanish Civil War and the succeeding years of dictatorship becomes the national concept of the unspeakable much as it does for Matilde, who modestly describes the unspeakable in terms of “los miedos.”

In a slightly more complex and implicit manner, Elsa also shares a connection with the historical unspeakable: her idealistic and rather delusional love affair with Agustín parallels the national obsession with the image of Franco that critics have long studied. When Elsa finally realizes that the relationship is a detriment to her mental and emotional health and that, in fact, it has finally come to an end, she can no longer identify herself by means of the other. Like the Spanish public during the transitional period, Elsa must come to terms with her own problematic self-concept

in a way that denies her defining of herself through the person who had previously dominated her life (Agustín/Franco). Elsa's complete inability to create her own identity and to achieve a method of understanding the new reality surrounding her leads her to commit suicide, thus demonstrating the troublingly powerful hold of the Other on her life.

What García Morales accomplishes with this novel is to make a complicated political commentary on the force of the unspeakable in the lives of Spanish citizens in the post-Franco era. Her use of the Gothic mode as the literary base for *El silencio de las sirenas* allows her to highlight the transgressive act of speaking in two distinct ways: by showing the written word to be a powerful method for women to achieve a voice in a traditionally male-dominated society, and by denoting the unspeakable in vocal and audible terms, in order to extract and expose historical trauma from within the present reality of her characters. In the end, García Morales effectively demonstrates that the unspeakable (historical past, collective memory) must be extracted from the subconscious in which it is buried so that it may be discussed openly, or else it will continue to haunt those who do not manage to find their transgressive voice.

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