OUTLAWED MATERNITIES, SOCIAL MANDATES, AND VIOLENCE IN THE NOVEL *LA PERRA* BY PILAR QUINTANA*

Richard Angelo Leonardo-Loayza [1]

***How to cite this article:** Leonardo-Loayza, R. A. (2020). Maternidades proscritas, mandatos sociales y violencia en la novela La perra, de Pilar Quintana. Estudios de Literatura Colombiana 47,pp. 151-168.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.elc.n47a08

1https://orcid.org/0000-0Q01-6867-2127
rleonardol@unmsm.edu.pe
Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Perú

Resumen: este artículo analiza la representación de la maternidad en *La Perra* (2017) de Pilar Quintana. La hipótesis apunta a que en esta novela se produce un desmantelamiento de los mandatos sociales a los que están sometidas las mujeres que desean ser consideradas auténticas madres. Dichos mandatos son opresivos para ellas, más aún si se actualizan en contextos de pobreza, lo que genera en las mujeres reacciones extremas, entre las que se destacan el surgimiento de la violencia. El estudio se realiza a partir de los aportes teóricos de Adrienne Rich, Cristina Palomar, Massimo Recalcati, Jacqueline Rose, Orna Donath, Judith Butler y Byung-Chul Han.

Palabras clave: Pilar Quintana; *La perra*, maternidad; mandatos sociales; violencia.

Abstract: This article analyzes the representation of motherhood in Pilar Quintana's *La Perra* ([The bitch], 2017). The hypothesis suggests that this novel dismantles the social mandates imposed on women who wish to be considered authentic mothers. These mandates are oppressive for them, especially when they are actualized in contexts of poverty, leading women to extreme reactions, among which the emergence of violence stands out. The study is based on the theoretical contributions of Adrienne Rich, Cristina Palomar, Massimo Recalcati, Jacqueline Rose, Orna Donath, Judith Butler, and Byung-Chul Han.

Keywords: Pilar Quintana; *La perra*, motherhood; social mandates; violence.

Editors: Andrés Vergara Aguirre, Christian Benavides Martínez, Valentina Noreña Gómez

Received: 2020.02.15
Accepted: 2020.04.27
Published: 2020.06.23

Copyright: ©2020 Estudios de Literatura Colombiana. This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons License BY-NC-SA 4.0 International

Despite being a fundamental event for humans, "the source and origin of our being in the world" (Rose, 2018, p. 39), the representation of motherhood has been scarcely addressed in literature. One explanation for this neglect could be the fact that fiction creators were mainly men and, therefore, strangers to the various issues that the experience of being a mother entails (Reyes, 2017, p. 2). Additionally, we might venture as a complementary reason that male writers did not recognize authentic literary value in this kind of practices; that is, from an androcentric perception of reality, writing about motherhood did not reach the status of a "true" literary theme. However, in recent decades, our context has changed considerably, either because the presence of women practicing literature has become more prolific, or because the topic of motherhood has become a central concern in contemporary theoretical debates thanks to feminist and post-feminist discourses. Concretely, today literature is experiencing some sort of boom in narrating the experience of being a mother with all that condition entails.

Those narratives not only address the topic of motherhood from a traditional perspective, where maternal love is represented as something instinctive, unconditional, an essential manifestation of every woman from her childhood; they also present it from a stance that views motherhood as a social and cultural construction, where women are at the mercy of a series of social mandates, which not only subject them, but end up twisting their own identity. In other words, literature is representing mothers as being predestined to fulfill this role, self-confident, selfless, and full of kindness, but also as conflicted individuals, lost amid demands they do not fully understand and find impossible to meet entirely. That said, in recent Latin American narrative, we can see the emergence of a significant group of female authors who have adopted the second paradigm and write about the real challenges of assuming motherhood. To cite just a few examples, we have Valeria Luiselli –*Los ingrávidos* [Faces in the crowd] (2011)–, Patricia Laurent Kullick –*La giganta* [The giantess] (2015)–, and Brenda Navarro –*Casas vacías* [Empty houses] (2017)– from Mexico; Margarita García Robayo –*Tiempo muerto* [Dead time] (2017)–, and Pilar Quintana –*La perra* [The bitch] (2017)– from Colombia; Claudia Piñeiro –*Una suerte pequeña* [A little luck] (2015)–, from Argentina; and Mónica Ojeda–*Mandíbula* [Jaw] (2018)– from Ecuador. A common denominator in these authors' works is the emergence of a new social topic, "bad mother," a character defined as someone whose actions do not fit within the traditional patterns of Western motherhood.

This article will analyze *La perra,* a novel by Pilar Quintana (Cali, 1972). In this work, Quintana dismantles the traditional notion of motherhood to which society has been accustomed, and highlights the reality permeating the desire to be a mother in a context of social inequality. To analyze her text, this critical reading will draw on contributions by Adrienne Rich, Massimo Recalcati, Jacqueline Rose, Orna Donath, Judith Butler, and Byung-Chul Han, among others.

On Good and Bad Mothers or the Snares of Motherhood

Anthropologist Marcela Lagarde (1997) explains that "Gender is a category under the sociocultural order, which was grounded on sexuality, which is, in turn, historically defined and meant by a gender-based order" (p. 26). Gender is a social construct that, on the ground of difference between men and women, sets a series of roles expected to be fulfilled by women and men so that they are recognized as such. These gender roles are manifested through mandates that provide rules and social norms dictating how men and women should behave. For example, while the former are expected to be rational, strong, protective, aggressive, intrepid, and autonomous, the latter are expected to be sensitive, maternal, nurturing, submissive, compliant, and dependent. It should be noted that these gender mandates are inscribed in the symbolic order, acquiring a prescriptive nature that ensures their reproduction (Ibarlucía, 2009, p. 287).

In this system, motherhood constitutes a key mandate of femininity and, in turn, becomes a condition that demands its own mandates, that is, women, when they procreate, bear a set of prescriptions they are expected to fulfill if they want to be recognized as mothers. In each era, a series of ways to understand motherhood and the maternal role has been constructed, outlining what is expected of mothers and what is deemed correct or incorrect in the exercise of motherhood. The attributes linked to this condition characterize it as something natural, essential, instinctive for women. Such an assumption is reproduced in the private, domestic sphere, highlighting feminine capacities regarding reproduction and caregiving. Thus, the sexual division of labor establishes that women, in addition to conception, gestation, childbirth, and breastfeeding, must exclusively take care of child-rearing because they possess "a sort of innate toolkit that induces women more than men to raise their children, whether biological or adopted, and to care for them" (Donath, 2017, p. 59). From this logic, typical of patriarchal system, the idea that being mothers is the natural

fate of women is established, even though it perpetuates situations of social, political, and economic inequality between women and men. Cristina Palomar (2004) synthesizes it in the following terms:

> Socially constructed motherhood involves generating a series of mandates related to the exercise of motherhood, embodied in individuals and institutions, and reproduced through discourses, images, and representations that create, in this way, a complex maternal imaginary based on an essentialist idea regarding the practice of motherhood. Like all essentialisms, this imaginary is transhistorical and transcultural, connecting with biological and mythological arguments. This is the root of stereotypes, judgments, and labels on women with children, which are self-imposed by women themselves. (p. 16)

Therefore, we can observe that being a mother carries a series of stereotypes that manifest as both an ideal and abstract representation, embodying the essence attributed to motherhood. In this way, the mother is a bearer of "unlimited love" (Recalcati, 2018, p. 130) and maternal instinct, from which virtues such as patience, care, tolerance, protection, sacrifice, and the willing dedication of women to motherhood derive. From the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of these mandates, two stereotypes arise: the good and the bad mothers. Regarding the former, Ricardo Garay (2008) explains that these stereotypes:

> are not limited to this prescription, but the norms deal also with a series of prohibitions regarding the defects to be suppressed: selfishness, eroticism, hostility, and not letting their anxieties, needs, and desires show (. . .). The maternal ideal encompasses not only a set of behaviors to display but even the feelings to be experienced. The maternal ideal is the internalization of all these precepts and prescriptions that regulate the experience of motherhood (p. 32).

Thus, mothers' behavior is not only subject to actions taken in favor of their children (where it is assumed that children are put ahead of themselves), but also to the control of the emotions and feelings mothers express towards them. As can be seen, these mandates also regulate the emotional world of mothers, dictating what is or is not appropriate for them. Somehow – despite the statement by Orna Donath (2017) that, there is no "single emotion that children inspire" (p. 63) –our social imaginary assumes and expects that all mothers feel the same if they wish to be seen as "good mothers." They are required to sacrifice for their children, to take care of them, and to love them unconditionally. An

important aspect to consider is that these social regulations, embedded in collective imagination, are not only imposed by society, represented by others, but are also internalized by mothers themselves. This is done in the hope of fulfilling the promises that the patriarchal system has always made to them. Donath (2017) explains it as follows:

> Motherhood will lead her to a valuable and justified existence, a state that confirms her necessity and vitality. Motherhood will announce to both the world and to herself her full embodiment as a woman in every sense of the word, a moral figure who not only repays her debt to nature by creating life, but also protects it and promotes it (p. 34).

It is worth to ask ourselves whether all women are predisposed to be "good mothers," or rather, if all of them possess the material and emotional conditions to achieve such an ideal. The truth is that many women either do not want to or cannot cope with such demands, as they are difficult and, often, impossible to meet. In this context, the figure of the "bad mother" emerges. Palomar (2004) defines this category in the following terms:

> "Bad mother" category is the negative of the social construction of motherhood in our society. This category, therefore, is the result of the contrast established with the culturally-fabricated gender ideal to create the myth of the woman-mother, based on the belief in maternal instinct, maternal love, and women's willingness to sacrifice and devote themselves to motherhood. Viewed in this way, "bad mothers" are those women who do not meet the ideals of socially constructed motherhood in three fundamental fields: legal, moral, and health. "Good mothers," by contrast, are those who conform to these ideals (p. 19).

Even though "bad mothers" have always been present in the history of humanity, it is only recently that serious reflection on them has begun, not with the intent to stigmatize or proscribe them, but with the aim of understanding the complexity of their existence. In this context, it is clear why these "bad mothers" have become protagonists in a significant portion of contemporary Latin American narrative. They are not the result of a trend; rather, they emerge as testimony to the presence of a marginalized social subject, rejected by the very system that produced it: the patriarchal system.

From Prosthetic to Outlawed Motherhoods

In *La perra,* a novel dealing with the theme of motherhood, the possible effects of societal mandates on women seeking to become mothers are made evident. The story presents the case of Damaris, a poor Afro-descendant woman, who has been living with Rogelio since she came of age. After a couple of years of living together without having children, people began to insist: "'When are the babies coming?' or 'What's taking you so long?'" (Quintana, 2019, p. 18). Faced with this situation, Damaris started drinking herbal infusions recommended to her for fertility. However, these drinks did not have the desired effect. Thus, "Another two years went by, and they had to explain to those who asked that the problem was that she wasn't getting pregnant. People started to avoid the topic, and Aunt Gilma advised her to see Santos" (p. 20), the woman healer. In social imagination, which is definitely patriarchal imagination, when two people come together, the belief is that it is logical for them to bearing children. When that does not occur, the community intervenes, either through constant questioning, like the one Damaris underwent, or through advice, from Aunt Gilma. It is interesting to note that in this imagination, a woman is the first direct responsible when the couple is not conceiving children. Conversely, it is taken for granted that the man is fertile and potent.

Due to the disappointment with the herbs, Damaris follows Aunt Gilma's advice and goes to see Santos, who

> Knew about herbs, knew how to massage, and healed with the secret, that is, invoking words and incantations. She tried a bit of everything on Damaris, and when she saw that it wasn't working, she said the problem must be with her husband and called him in. Although visibly uncomfortable, Rogelio drank all the concoctions, accepted all the prayers, and endured all the rubs that Santos administered. But the longer it took for the pregnancy to occur, the more resistant he became, and one day he announced that he wouldn't go anymore. Damaris took this as an attack against her and stopped speaking to him (pp. 20-21).

This fragment corroborates the prevailing idea that a woman is pointed as the primary responsible for infertility. An important point to highlight is that the main interest in having offspring is Damaris', not Rogelio's. This is explained by the sexual division of labor, where woman is expected to manage this family-related action (a marriage without children is not considered a "real" family). In this sense,

Damaris' attitude is understandable when Rogelio grows tired of trying. For her, that is a personal affront, as not having children calls her femininity into question. In other words, being unable to bear children defines her as less of a woman than those who can procreate. Motherhood is a condition that reaffirms women's femininity, completing them. Failing to achieve this status suggests that they are flawed, imperfect. This impairs women's self-esteem. Damaris feels this way, as throughout the story she expresses discontent with herself:

> Damaris was overwhelmed with sadness, so everything—getting out of bed, preparing meals, chewing food—was an enormous effort. She felt that life was like a cove and that she had to cross it walking with her feet stuck in the mud and water up to her waist, alone, completely alone, in a body that did not give her children and that only served to break things (p. 75).

Damaris believes that her life is not complete and reacts against herself, blaming herself for not being able to have children. She perceives herself as an imperfect, clumsy being, with a body whose usefulness is defined by its ability to procreate.[1] In her mind, her body only makes sense for reproduction. In a passage of the novel, a singular event occurs related to this aspect: Damaris dropped some cups that Rogelio had recently bought, and he said to her:

> —They didn't last even two months (. . .) No doubt you are heavy-handed.
> Damaris didn't reply, but that night, when they turned off the TV and he tried to get close, she avoided him and went into the room where she used to sleep alone. She kept staring at her hands for a while. They were huge, with wide fingers, rough and dry palms, and lines as marked as cracks in the earth. They were men's hands, the hands of a construction worker or a fisherman capable of hauling in giant fish. (pp. 58-59)

Attention should be paid to Damaris's perception of her body, in this case, her hands. They are "huge," with "wide fingers," "rough and dry palms," and "lines like cracks in the earth." In other words, they do not correspond to a woman's hands. Therefore, it is stated that they are a man's hands, the hands of a construction worker or a fisherman. It is not the narrator who is focusing on

[1] Judith Butler argued that body is an ideal constructed through historically and socially regulated practices, as it is home to sociocultural messages and conditionings (1997). Women have been taught that the primary mission of their bodies is to serve as a receptacle for the exercise of motherhood.

the hands, but Damaris herself; she is the one who assumes and evaluates her hands as masculine. The subtext of this statement is that she does not consider herself an authentic woman, with the physical qualities that supposedly every woman should possess: delicacy, finesse, skill. Deep down, this self-representation is the confirmation that she cannot be a mother because her body is not feminine, not prepared to deserve motherhood.

After Santos's artifices didn't work, Aunt Gilma told Damaris about a thirty-eight-year-old woman (Damaris was already 30) who became pregnant thanks to the ministrations of the jabainá, an Indigenous healer she went to visit. He not only gave her more potions but also added baths, incense rituals, and invited her to ceremonies where he anointed, rubbed, smoked, prayed, and sang over her. But they achieved nothing:

> Damaris didn't even have a delay, and the jabainá told them he couldn't do anything for them. In some ways, it was a relief, as having relations had become an obligation. They stopped, at first maybe just to rest, and she felt liberated, but at the same time defeated and useless, a disgrace as a woman, an error of nature. (Quintana, 2019, p. 24)

Here, two points are worth reflecting on. The first is that Damaris stops having sexual relations with her husband Rogelio. Once she loses all hope of getting pregnant, she concludes that sex is unimportant if it doesn't lead to reproduction. Somehow, the postponed desire to be a mother silences other desires, such as having relations with her husband, which had become a burden. From this perspective, it can be understood why the suspension of sexual relations was a liberation for her. On the other hand, it is revealing that this feeling of guilt for not being able to bear children is reaffirmed. Damaris not only feels defeated and useless (worthless) but also a "shame as a woman" because she cannot fulfill the role that nature has given to her, hence being a "wretch" (residue) of it. Here we see the powerful relationship that society, since the dawn of time, has established between women and nature, considering it, as Sherry B. Ortner (1979) rightly says, closer than that which can arise with men, due to women's physiological functions; "a conception with which she herself, as an observer of herself and the world, can agree" (Ortner, 1979, p. 119). Women are conceived as a metonymy of nature, as they, like nature, can and should give life.

However, things change when, during one of her walks through the town, Damaris encounters her neighbor Doña Elodia standing in the middle of the street with a cardboard box containing puppies. Doña Elodia tells her that her dog was poisoned and she is giving away the puppies. Damaris is moved and decides to take one of them. Doña Elodia warns her that it is a female, but Damaris doesn't care and takes it anyway. In the social imaginary, a female puppy does not have the same value as a male one, hence the need to inform Damaris of its gender. It is clear that this rejection is based on the fact that females are prone to motherhood, which is perceived as a problem (economic, considering the maintenance of their potential offspring). Something similar happens with women (who are also female), because when they reach motherhood, it is considered some sort of illness or weakening (Rose, 2018, p. 36). This is one of the patriarchal system contradictions, that it demands women to become mothers, and as they do, that system itself labels them as a social burden.

Returning to the story, from that moment on, Damaris establishes a special relationship with the adopted dog, which becomes a remedy for her loneliness. For example, since she didn't know where to put the puppy, "she held it against her chest. It fit in her hands, smelled of milk, and made her feel a great urge to hug and cry" (Quintana, 2019, p. 11). From the beginning, Damaris doesn't see this little animal as a pet. It's not coincidental that she holds it against her chest (the ultimate symbol of motherhood); this act mirrors what mothers do as soon as they see their newborns. This impression is reinforced by the tenderness she feels upon touching the puppy; touching it awakens in Damaris a desire to protect it, as if it were her child. Massimo Recalcati (2018) tells us that "the maternal Other is the first 'rescuer' in the traumatic beginning of life; their hands serve to preserve that life, to protect it, to save it from the possibility of falling" (p. 23). This notion is reinforced by the fact that Damaris, despite knowing her husband's bad temper towards animals (he has three dogs and mistreats them), still takes the puppy home: "she told herself that everything would be different with the dog. It was hers, and she wouldn't let Rogelio do any of those things to it; she wouldn't let him look at it badly" (Quintana, 2019, p. 13). Damaris feels obliged not only to love but also to protect her dog, even from her partner.

Feeding her puppy will be a challenge for her. At first, she bought a syringe to feed it milk because the puppy didn't know how to lick from a bowl, and the baby bottles sold in the village were

meant for human babies and too large. Don Jaime, the owner of the village store, recommended that she feed it with a dropper, but Damaris realized that this wasn't working. One day, it occurred to her to soak bread in milk and let the puppy suck on it, and that was the solution. Damaris doesn't give up at the first obstacle she encounters; instead, she finds a way to feed her puppy at all costs. In this way, she fulfills one of the mandates of motherhood: feeding her child. An interesting aspect to highlight is the enormous effort Damaris makes to regularly feed her dog. In the story, we read:

> In those days, the tide was high in the morning, so to buy bread for the dog, Damaris had to get up before dawn, carry the oar from the cabin, go down the stairs with it on her shoulder, push the boat from the dock, put it in the water, row to the other side, tie the boat to a palm tree, take the oar to one of the fishermen's houses by the lime kiln, ask the fisherman, his wife, or the children to look after it, listen to that neighbor's complaints and stories, and walk halfway across the village to Don Jaime's store... and the same on her way back. Every day, even in the rain. (p. 16)

As can be clearly seen, bringing food for the dog is not an easy task; on the contrary, it requires a lot of work. However, this does not matter to Damaris as long as she can fulfill the mandate of sacrificing herself for her dog, whom she must take care of. This attitude is emphasized when analyzing how she treats her puppy compared to the other dogs in her house. Rogelio has three others: Danger, Olivo, and Mosco. For the little dog, treatment is distinct: "During the day, Damaris carried the dog in her bra, between her soft, generous breasts, to keep her warm. At night, she left her in the cardboard box that Don Jaime had given her, with a hot water bottle and the T-shirt she had worn that day so she wouldn't miss her smell" (Quintana, 2019, p. 16). This behavior goes beyond a simple act of kindness towards animals. The way she treats her dog is more akin to raising a human being than to taking care of a puppy. This situation reaches its most extreme manifestation when Damaris decides to name the dog. She calls her Chirli. On one occasion, when her cousin Luzmila, with whom she had grown up and knew everything about her, visited her, Luzmila asked upon hearing the dog's name: "–Chirli like the beauty queen? –Luzmila laughed–, wasn't that what you were going to name your daughter?" (Quintana, 2019, p. 19). This fact is highly significant. Naming the dog the name she had chosen for the daughter she wanted to have implies an act of substitution, meaning Damaris places the dog in the place of the daughter she could not conceive. Symbolically, she recognizes a similar or equal

value, hence the intense displays of affection. It should be remembered that a name exists before procreation and, as Marcer and Kicillof (1990) explain, it is through this insistence on naming that the chosen name will be loaded with an unconscious force seeking to realize an ideal or a postponed desire, as it will be related to unconscious material. Likewise, when a name is received, "a symbolic burden of what is expected to be is also received, so one can identify with these burdens to become what is not certainly real" (Ledezma, 2016, p. 35). And Damaris, with the decision to adopt Chirli and treat her in this way, has realized her postponed desire to be a mother. The dog has become her daughter, despite not having given birth to her or being a human being.

In this action by Damaris, there is some defiance of what Adrienne Rich (2019) called "the institution of motherhood," which is "motherhood under patriarchy: the set of assumptions and norms, regulations and controls hijacking the experience, ordering it to subject it to an external power, and domesticating this part of the lives of millions of women (and other gestating entities)" (p. 18). With this act of adoption that Damaris performs with Chirli, a re-signification of the concept of motherhood occurs, which is overflowed, questioned, and redefined in its scope. Motherhood is no longer seen as a biological imposition, derived from nature, but as a human decision, encompassing the choice of the type of offspring desired, even if it is not human. For this reason, it can be said that we are not witnessing a woman who passively accepts the dictates of destiny, which has outright denied her motherhood, but rather a being with agency, who has done something to overcome her state of precariousness and achieve her goals (Sen, 1985, p. 203).

However, it is necessary to point out that this act is not free from certain circumstances that enable and push its occurrence. Both Damaris and Rogelio are people of limited economic resources. They live off artisanal fishing and whatever they can earn by maintaining some summer houses of wealthy people who reside in the city. Moreover, they live in a village (with just one street) on the Colombian Pacific coast, between the sea and the mountains, without real access to modernity (while they suffer its consequences, they cannot access its supposed benefits). For this reason, it is unimaginable to think of any assisted reproduction method that could help them conceive their child; they are left with herbs, concoctions, prayers, and healers. In that context, another denied possibility is to adopt a child. Thus, the only way Damaris finds to become a mother is to adopt this puppy, who will act as the

daughter denied by nature. This case could be defined as a prosthetic motherhood, where the child (to be precise, the unprocreated daughter) is replaced, substituted, by another similar entity: a dog.

However, Chirli grows up quickly, and as she does, she becomes a more autonomous and independent being. For example, she has acquired the habit of escaping and wandering into the woods, where she spends entire days. Damaris perceives this behavior negatively, assuming that her dog is disobedient, rebellious, and in some way abandoning her. For this reason, she tries to discipline her in various ways, but she does not achieve any positive results. During one of the dog's escapades, Damaris's attitude towards her changes noticeably:

> She removed the bed from the kiosk and threw it over the cliff into a dump filled with motor oil cans and broken gasoline barrels in the cove. She stopped petting her, giving her the best scraps, paying attention when she wagged her tail, saying goodnight to her, and even turning on the light in the kiosk. When she was bitten by a bat, Damaris only noticed because Rogelio pointed out the trail of blood and asked if she didn't plan to treat her. The cut was on her nose and wouldn't stop bleeding. As Damaris shrugged and continued with what she was doing, straining the morning coffee, Rogelio went to the cabin to get the Gusantrex and applied it himself. (Quintana, 2019, p. 73)

Damaris has taken away all material things from her dog: shelter, food, and the light in the kiosk to prevent her from being bitten by bats. Likewise, she has taken away the affectionate: she no longer pets her, nor does she show gestures of love like saying goodnight or checking that she is okay. It is very significant that, when Chirli is bitten by bats *(chimbilacos),* Damaris does not feel affected and delegates the task of caring for her to her husband. It is as if Damaris, in response to Chirli's undisciplined actions, stops caring about and loving her. This crisis reaches one of its peak moments when the dog gets pregnant:

> she couldn't bear to see her. It was torture to find her with her belly larger and larger every time she opened the shack door. The dog insisted on always being there and following her from the shack to the kiosk, from the kiosk to the laundry sink, from the laundry sink back to the shack. Damaris tried to shoo her away. "Go away," she would say, "leave me," and once she even tried to raise her hand as if to hit her, but the dog wasn't even scared and kept following her, slow and heavy with the puppies inside her. (pp. 75-76)

Damaris's attitude towards Chirli can be considered in two different ways. From the perspective of a mother, the woman is disappointed in her "daughter," who has become pregnant due to her disobedience. Damaris cannot accept that Chirli has grown up and no longer depends on her. On the other hand, from the perspective of a woman with the desire to be a mother, Damaris experiences a process of envy because Chirli has achieved what she always wanted: to become pregnant. Hence the anger and the "torture" of seeing her in her gestational state. It is ironic that Chirli turned out not to be a good mother:

> On the second night, she ate one of the puppies, and in the following days, she would leave the remaining three abandoned to go sunbathe by the pool, lie in the laundry sink, where it was always cool, or under one of the houses with the other dogs, anywhere just to not be near them. Damaris had to grab her by force, take her back to the kiosk, and make her stay lying down so they could nurse. (p. 77)

Such a behavior is significant in the story, as it confirms to Damaris that Chirli is not exactly the daughter she longed for. Far from the ideal image of a calm, obedient, and submissive daughter, she got a rebellious, insubordinate being who does not learn from any measure. The last straw in this situation is that Chirli not only becomes pregnant but also does not behave like a real mother. She does not fulfill the obligations she is supposedly required to in her new condition: she neither feeds nor takes care of her puppies. All of this causes the relationship between Damaris and Chirli to deteriorate. That is why the woman seeks to get rid of her dog by giving her away. However, repeatedly, Chirli escapes from her new home and returns to Damaris's house. The latter returns her for the third consecutive time and asks Ximena, Chirli's new owner, to tie her up so she cannot escape anymore.

When Damaris thinks that everything is over, she is surprised to find Chirli back in her usual spot the next morning, but with the news that she has destroyed some curtains that were very valuable to Damaris, which she had washed and hung up the previous afternoon. Those were the curtains of the late Nicolasito, the rich boy she knew in her childhood and whom she saw being dragged by the sea at the cliff, without being able to do anything to prevent it. Damaris will always carry this guilt. The boy's parents left the place but left the summer house in the care of someone. When this person died, Damaris promised the homeowners over the phone that she would take care of its maintenance

and cleaning, especially Nicolasito's room, which featured curtains with motifs from *The Jungle Book.* Seeing those curtains torn (there were others on the clothesline, but they were intact), Damaris reacted with fury and grabbed the animal by the neck with a rope. In the middle of the struggle, the woman realized that Chirli was pregnant again:

> 'She is pregnant again', she told herself and kept squeezing harder and harder, even long after the dog fell suffocated, curled up on the ground, and stopped moving. A yellow puddle of strong urine slowly spread toward Damaris and became longer and thinner until it reached her bare feet. Only then did Damaris react. She loosened the rope, moved away from the puddle, approached to touch the dog with her foot, and when it didn't move, she had to accept what she had done. (Quintana, 2019, pp. 100-101)

Damaris reaches her limit. Unable to tolerate Chirli's behavior, she ends up strangling her. It is a violent action, intensified when she realizes that the dog is pregnant for the second time.

This fact irritates the woman, and as a result, she pulls the rope with unusual cruelty. How can this end for Chirli be considered? One possible interpretation is that Damaris, realizing she couldn't get rid of her by giving her away, chooses to eliminate her, but it must be emphasized that this would be motivated by Chirli's rebellious behavior toward her prosthetic mother, Damaris. Another, more disturbing interpretation, which reinforces an impression already hinted at earlier, is that this sadistic action by Damaris is explained by the fact that Chirli can procreate (even twice) and she cannot. It would then be an act of envy for something that cannot be obtained. Whatever the explanation, Damaris's behavior can be labeled as that of a bad mother, even if prosthetic, because she does not act according to the roles and mandates established by the heteropatriarchal society. It should be noted that the fear Damaris experiences at the possibility of being discovered for having acted this way is related to the circumstance that her family and social environment had accepted Chirli as her daughter. In this sense, it is an act of filicide. Although the victim is an animal, the significance lies in the symbolic order. Damaris's destiny was not motherhood; even so, she defied her fate by adopting an animal and turning it into a child. Her purpose is thwarted when her desired child fails to live up to her desire. Additionally, Damaris is not willing to fulfill the mandates of motherhood to the ultimate consequences. Although she tried to adapt to them at first, the truth is that these mandates have overwhelmed her, provoking in her the emergence of a violence she didn't think herself capable of.

Violence is precisely a fundamental element that runs throughout Pilar Quintana's story. It is not only represented in the murder of Chirli but also appears in a series of domestic events, such as the systematic and repeated poisoning of dogs at the village. A noteworthy aspect of this violence is that its existence is somehow denied by the characters in the novel's diegesis and even by the narrator. For example, despite being a common practice among her neighbors, Damaris resisted thinking that they killed the dogs on purpose. She believed that dogs might "accidentally have eaten poisoned rat bait, or rats themselves, as they were easy to catch when poisoned" (Quintana, 2019, p. 9). Likewise, when she learned later that Ximena's dog, Chirli's brother, died from poisoning too, she assumed that "it was possible that something else had killed it, say a snake or an illness" (p. 45). As can be seen, Damaris refused to accept violence committed by people around her. For her, it did not exist; the events were caused by other issues in which there was no malice on the part of the people in her community.

Such an attitude was not exclusive to Damaris, as it was extrapolated to the rest of the town's inhabitants, who, despite living amid a climate of violence, seemed uninterested in delving into its causes. This is the case with the aforementioned poisoning of dogs. They never asked who was doing it or why. It just happened repeatedly, like a daily event that people accepted without investigating its possible cause. The same thing happened with the deaths of some characters, like Mr. Gene, the caretaker of the Reyes house, or Damaris's mother. The former was found drowned in the sea one day. Despite suffering from almost total paralysis and being confined to a wheelchair, people accepted that he had committed suicide, or that his wife, who suffered from memory lapses, might have pushed him out of fatigue or grief. But the neighbors didn't ask further. As per the Reyes house's caretaker, people assumed it was a hunting accident. No one made any additional comment. And Damaris's mother was said to have died as a result of a stray bullet. This time, it was the narrator who, after mentioning it, decided to move on to another subject, without providing the reader with even a minimal explanation of such a terrible event. It is as if, despite these manifestations of violence, they preferred to silence them, to deny them. They just happened, and that was it. No one (including the narrator) was interested in knowing or saying more than necessary; their deaths were accepted as just another part of everyday life.

While it is impossible to determine the exact dates when the events of the diegesis occur in La perra, it is clear that some references point to contemporary Colombia (the mention of cell phones, text messages, and other modern devices prove this). At times, it seems as if the novel talks about the post-conflict period that Colombia is experiencing, about its period of peace, and warns that although large-scale violence is disappearing, smaller-scale, domestic, microphysical violence still persists, embedded in people's lives.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2016) is right when he states that "Some things never disappear. Violence –for example" (p. 13). It seeks other ways to manifest that are not explicit; it camouflages itself to avoid being countered. In Quintana's novel, it is internalized in individuals and in the way they perceive the reality of their context. For them, violence is invisible or wants to pass as such, not because it cannot be seen, but because its existence no longer bothers or disturbs anyone. As Raymond L. Williams says, referring to Colombian literature, "perhaps most books have been vehicles of ideological dialogue (. . .) and have always been related to political activity" (cited in Rutter-Jensen, 2009, p. 37). This statement can be applied to La perra because, in addition to presenting a reflection on motherhood, it links this personal and private issue with one of a social and political nature: violence.

Final Thoughts

This novel tells the story of a woman who, while not rejecting gender mandates, tried to adapt them to her particular circumstances. In this sense, adopting a dog as if it were a child should be read as an act of rebellion against a gendered system. However, the novel also shows that the demands of motherhood imposed on women make it impossible for them to fulfill these completely, which drives crises in mothers that can lead to acts full of violence (such as Chirli's death). There is a general idea surrounding the love of mothers for their children, but the truth is that it is more of a cultural issue than a biological one. Quintana's novel brings this situation to light. In this sense, La perra should be highlighted because it reveals that other side of motherhood that people refuse to accept, a difficult job for which not all human beings are equipped. Likewise, the novel deals with the integration of violence into people's lives, developing on a micro-level, at the domestic, intimate level. In some way, the story becomes a kind of lesson about the excesses to which a human being can go when in an

extreme position. In this case, because of the mandates of motherhood. Finally, it can be said that Pilar Quintana's La perra fits into what would be the narrative subgenre of dissident motherhoods because it presents a new social subject: "bad mothers," characters who are now being considered not based on their actions but on the complex social conditions in which they develop as individuals.

Bibliographic References

Butler, J. (1997). Excerpt from the introduction to Bodies that matter. In R. Lancaster; M. di Leonardo (Eds.). *The gender and sexuality reader* (pp. 531-542). London: Routledge.

Donath, O. (2017). *Madres arrepentidas. Una mirada radical a la maternidad y sus falacias sociales.* Barcelona: Reservoir Books.

Garay, R. (2008). El destino de ser madres: la ideología de la maternidad como soporte discursivo de las nuevas tecnologías reproductivas. In M. Tarducci. *Maternidades en el siglo XXI* (pp. 29-59). Buenos Aires: Espacio.

Han, B. C. (2016). *Topología de la violencia*. Madrid: Herder.

Ibarlucía, B. (2009). Roles sexuales. En S. B. Gamba (Coord.), *Diccionario de estudios de género y feminismos* (pp. 287-289). Buenos Aires: Biblos.

Lagarde, M. (1997). *Género y feminismo. Desarrollo humano y democracia.* Madrid: horas y HORAS.

Ledezma, A. (2016). ¿Nombrarse o ser nombrado? El nombre como depositación. *Revista Wimblu*, 11(2), pp. 31-39.

Marcer, R; Kicillof, D. (1990). Introducción al psicoanálisis de la elección de los nombres propios: el caso de Sigismund Schlomo Freud. *Revista de Psicoanálisis 47* (1), pp. 129-139.

Ortner, S. (1979). ¿Es la mujer con respecto al hombre lo que la naturaleza con respecto a la cultura? En O. Harris y K. Young (Eds.). *Antropología y feminismo* (pp. 109-131). Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama.

Palomar, C. (2004). Malas madres: la construcción social de la maternidad. *Debate Feminista* 30, pp. 12-34.

Quintana, P. (2019). *La perra*. Barcelona: Penguin Random House.

Recalcati, M. (2018). *Las manos de la madre. Deseo, fantasmas y herencia de lo materno.* Barcelona: Anagrama.

Reyes, M. (2017). La representación de la maternidad en la literatura italiana. El caso de Juana I, Semíramis y Erzsebet Bathory. *Tonos digitales: Revista de Estudios Filológicos* 32, 1-16.

Rich, A. (2019). *Nacemos de mujer. La maternidad como experiencia e institución.* Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

Rose, J. (2018). Madres. *Un ensayo sobre la crueldad y el amor.* Madrid: Siruela.

Rutter-Jensen, C. (2009). *La heteronormatividad y sus discordias. Narrativas alternativas del afecto en Colombia.* Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.

Sen, A. (1985). Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy* 82(4), 169-221.