

BOOK REVIEW

## Major Concepts in Spanish Feminist Theory

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In *Major Concepts in Spanish Feminist Theory*, Roberta Johnson reconstructs Spanish feminist thought in an accessible and original way. This is not a conventional history of Spanish feminism, but rather a history of Spanish feminist theory that, while preserving chronological order, is articulated around six fundamental concepts addressed in six chapters along with an introduction and an epilogue. These concepts are *solitude*, *personality*, *social class*, *work*, *difference*, and *equality*. Masterfully, Johnson takes us from one chapter to another with a unity of meaning that traverses the book.

The first chapter studies the concept of *solitude* in the work of authors from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. From the great feminists of the nineteenth century, such as Concepción Arenal or Emilia Pardo Bazán, to the sadly and recently deceased Carmen Alborch, Spanish feminism considers solitude as a necessary condition for women in order to form their own identity and fully realize themselves as independent individuals. On the one hand, the issue of solitude can be approached from a social or external perspective, where women desire to create their own physical place. On the other, the desire for solitude can be internal, where that physical space is linked to consciousness that enables personal development, being oneself, and building an independent personality. Neither of these perspectives nullifies the importance of the relationship with others.

Intimately related to solitude is the concept of *personality*, to which Johnson dedicates the second chapter of the book. Most of the authors that Johnson studies understand personality as a set of complex interactions between the inner and outer self. According to Johnson, Rosa Chacel was the first Spanish writer to develop the idea, suggested by other earlier authors such as Arenal or Hildegart Rodríguez, of an interaction between these two dimensions. Neither in Chacel's works nor in María Zambrano's (also studied by Johnson) can we find a feminist use of the concept of *personality*; but, as Johnson points out, their thought is easily linked to a feminist meaning. In fact, Zambrano's concept of *persona* is close to other authors' idea of personality, referring to a set of specific characteristics that distinguish one individual from others. Carmen Martín Gaité departs from the dichotomy between the interior and exterior dimensions of the person, but like Chacel and Zambrano, she believed in the possibility of discovering the authentic internal self hidden behind external impositions. Although Martín Gaité's use of the concept of *personality* is ambiguous, Spanish writers generally associate it with the formation of an identity that gives women independence and dignity. That brings to light the connection with the concept of *solitude*, since the

confirmation of one's own complete identity seems to require a place or a state that enables women to find themselves.

The reflections of authors such as Arenal about personality point directly to the question of work. But before studying this concept, Johnson addresses the issue of *social class* in the third chapter of the book, a notion that distances Spanish feminist thought from that produced in other European countries and in the United States. Although it was a rather secondary issue in feminist thought of the nineteenth century (except for the work of Pardo Bazán), it became important when Spain began to industrialize, and remained so into the beginning of the twentieth century. Johnson points out that the intersection between gender and class becomes relevant with the contributions of Margarita Nelken. According to Johnson, Nelken, who addressed her harshest criticisms to middle-class Spanish women, considered it impossible to tackle issues related to women apart from their social class. Another essential author of Spanish feminist thought of the early twentieth century, Carmen de Burgos, emphasized the legal situation of Spanish women, all inferior to men regardless of social class. The theme of social class resurfaces in Spanish feminist theory of the 1970s, when the lawyer Lidia Falcón explicated her theory of women as a social class, which is perfectly unpacked by Johnson.

Giving unity to her book, Johnson dedicates the fourth chapter to the concept of *work*, closely linked to social class and present in all Spanish feminist thought from the eighteenth century to the present. Johnson notes the difficulty of defining this concept particularly with regard to women, since the unpaid work that they have historically done—both in the domestic sphere and in agricultural and livestock-related tasks—has not been regarded as proper work. Already in the eighteenth century, Benito Jerónimo Feijoo had defended the intellectual capacity of women and their training for the practice of professions such as politics. The main vindication of feminism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the right to female education. Consistent with this, Arenal demanded women's right to a profession and a salary as a means to be self-supporting and to support their children. Following an impeccable chronology in all chapters, Johnson argues that the main objective of feminism since the early twentieth century has been women's right to paid work, and she points to several different arguments defending this right. Nelken, for example, points out the link between work and the basic dignity of the human being. De Burgos defends total equality between women and men, both in working conditions and in wages. Toward the end of the century, Falcón displaces work from a place of centrality, because, as Johnson clarifies, according to Falcón, work by itself does not lead to authentic feminine liberation; this requires women to acquire a sense of themselves. Johnson notes that after the 1978 Constitution, democratic Spain left aside the question of work. Spanish feminist thought then started an internal debate between two theoretical tendencies: so-called difference feminism and equality feminism.

The fifth and sixth chapters are dedicated to the concepts of *difference* and *equality* respectively. Although the controversy between difference and equality feminism characterizes the end of the twentieth century, Johnson tracks the historical antecedents of both approaches, and argues that Spanish feminism in its beginnings is best understood from the difference perspective developed in the fifth chapter. Since the nineteenth century, feminists such as Arenal have argued that women's more compassionate and sensitive nature leads to advocating the exercise of some professions for women and not others, such as the judiciary or those that involve the use of weapons. Rosario de Acuña or Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer, among others, also defended women's rights

based on the presumption of a specific difference in female nature. And, then, at the end of the twentieth century, the philosopher Victoria Sendón de León rejected any attempt by women to join a patriarchal society, highlighting her idea that equality is a myth. One of the main representatives of thinking about sexual difference in Spain is the historian María Milagros Rivera, who refers to equality as a fraud. In contrast, the philosopher Celia Amorós—considered along with another philosopher, Amelia Valcárcel, the main representative of Spanish equality feminism at the end of the twentieth century—has been very critical of difference thinking.

The sixth chapter, focused on the concept of *equality*, signals Johnson's attempt to draw more or less constant lines of thought in Spanish feminist theory. Authors of the early twentieth century like Nelken, Clara Campoamor, Rodríguez, or de Burgos better fit the tendency of equality feminism. At the end of the twentieth century, Amorós played a key role in the foundation of philosophical feminism in Spain. From her first writings, Amorós refutes the idea of an ontological difference between women and men defended by difference feminism (Amorós 1995). The idea of a specific female nature is too reminiscent of the traditional patriarchal construction of women, and poses serious problems for preserving feminist vindication (Amorós 2000; 2007). The reflections of Amorós and the group of researchers who were part of the Permanent Seminar "Feminismo e Ilustración," which she created at the Complutense University of Madrid in 1987, philosophically support an enlightened feminism focused on the demand of the real universalization of the principles of equality and autonomy (Madruga Bajo 2020).

The way in which Johnson ends her book shows the wealth and power of contemporary Spanish feminist thought, which is engaged in theorizing "Toward a Better World." Under this title, Johnson gathers, as an epilogue, the theoretical proposal of the philosopher Alicia Puleo. Her critical ecofeminism manages to reconcile feminism and ecology in a theory that defends, in addition to women's equality and autonomy, eco-justice and sustainability as principles that must be observed to overcome the logic of oppression. Puleo's ecofeminism fights the androcentrism that equates the generically human with men and the anthropocentrism that places human beings in the center of everything and as the measure of everything. Her theory constitutes an ethical proposal that defends the universalization of an ecological ethics of care. And it is also a political proposal that seeks to promote a global transformation (Puleo 2011; 2019).

Throughout each chapter of Johnson's book, we find relevant themes that help to elucidate the deployment of Spanish feminist thought, one of which is Spanish feminist theory's frequent use of the lens of literature, particularly the novel. The protagonists of novels by Carmen Laforet, Martín Gaité, or Ana María Matute, for example, illustrate the need for solitude for women to claim to their own space and as a state from which to build their own personality. Likewise, the lives of women of all social classes of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s are represented through the novel. Another theme is the influence of the historical, economic, and social circumstances particular to Spain since the eighteenth century in which Spanish feminist thought developed (Johnson and Zubiaurre 2012). Political instability, the delay in the industrialization of the country, and the universal presence of Catholicism are phenomena that help explain the divergence of the development of feminism in Spain from that in other countries in Europe and North America. The mediator role of the Catholic church, suggests Johnson, could explain, for example, the late entry of the concept of *solitude* into Spanish feminism. The influence of Catholicism can also explain the arguments of authors such as María Lejárraga (aka María Martínez Sierra), which referred to women's right to

work. She, like other Spanish feminists, appealed to traditional Catholic values and the reverence for motherhood to advocate for a profession for women; their resignation and natural ability to devote themselves to others made women capable of working for the good of the country, giving her arguments a nationalist tinge. Johnson points out that Nelken's arguments in demanding that women enter the public sphere also appeal to nationalism, probably to avoid the resistance of conservative readers not willing to easily accept equal rights for women. Besides all that, in each chapter we can read how the long parenthesis of Franco's dictatorship influenced the development of Spanish feminist thought, by reverting to the traditional patriarchal discourse of femininity, enclosing women in the sphere of domesticity, and silencing Spanish feminist thought. This makes the writings of feminists such as María Laffitte (Countess of Campo Alange) and Lili Álvarez, among others, especially valuable. As Johnson indicates, feminist writers during the Franco regime felt a renewed desire for solitude that would provide them with their own space. Thus, Spanish feminism is currently in the process of recovering its own discourse, in part through the elaboration of its own genealogy.

Another theme Johnson highlights that helps us understand the specificity of Spanish feminist thought is the enormous influence that the biographical circumstances of the authors studied have on their reflections. For example, the philosopher María Zambrano's experience in exile after the Civil War and her separation from the circle of the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset were key influences on her notion of *solitude* and the development of her concept of *persona*. Such influences can be seen in writers such as Laforet, whose personal collected letters show her understanding of solitude as necessary for creative writing; or Martín Gaité, who, according to Johnson, came to conclusions about personality based on her situation as a woman and consideration of women and their social and ontological status. Johnson sees many Spanish feminist thinkers responding to the patriarchal thought explicitly expressed by famous male thinkers. Prominent men, such as Ortega y Gasset or Georg Simmel, defended the intellectual inferiority of women. Others, like physician Gregorio Marañón, maintained the differentiation of spheres for women and men as a function of the different and complementary nature of the sexes, and perpetuated the notion that women who left their proper sphere were unacceptably masculinized. Authors such as De Burgos or Chacel challenged these arguments. Johnson's exposition enables us to understand that patriarchal discourse is neither inevitable nor solely a product of a historical era. Rather, patriarchal thought can be interpreted as a reaction to the feminist discourse that defended women's equal rights and opportunities (Madruga Bajo 2020). Even when we cannot speak of specifically feminist reflections in authors such as Zambrano, Chacel, or Martín Gaité, who in many of their contributions did not refer explicitly to women, their writings can be linked to a feminist approach.

Johnson displays a deep knowledge of the history of Spanish feminist thought, and communicates a fluid, coherent, and rigorous understanding that gives us access to the lesser known writings of these recovered Spanish feminist authors. Her selection of concepts gives shape to an excellent and indispensable book for knowing the past and the present of Spanish feminist theory.

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