

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Carmen Laforet

Nada

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“And all the life in this house, as dirty as a muddy river ... When you’ve lived here longer, this house and its smell and its old things, if you’re like me, they’ll seize the life in you. And you’re like me ... Aren’t you like me? Tell me, don’t you resemble me a little?” (Laforet 68).

At the age of 23, and within a few months, Laforet wrote her first novel, *Nada*. Published in 1945, and set in Barcelona in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, the novel paints the picture of a once wealthy family, who is barely surviving by feeding off of each other’s energy and misery, while residing in a grotesquely decaying flat that is a symbol of stagnation and madness.

Laforet’s *Nada* is an allegorical commentary on the destiny of Spain and its people after their civil war. The novel delves into social injustice, postwar horrors, impaired familial and social relationships, as well as an intrusive obsession with existentialism. The story also studies the consequences of love, conveying its sterility.

At its core, *Nada* is a coming-of-age story, a Bildungsroman, as it focuses on the development of its young heroine; the reader follows the mental transition of the quite naïve narrator to maturity. Laforet also presents a realistic account of a young woman growing up during tough times, and in a strict society, in postwar Spain; the story is, therefore, inevitably semi-autobiographical.

The narrator of the novel is eighteen-year-old Andrea, who moves to Barcelona to study literature in the university, in an attempt to escape from her former lifestyle. She grew up in a convent, and is now an orphan; her mother has recently passed away and her father is never mentioned. When she moves in with her maternal grandmother and the rest of her extended family, she joins a dysfunctional household, where its eccentric inhabitants, in the aftermath of the civil war, are being devoured by filth and violence.

Nada, Davies (186) argues, reveals “the misery and dreadful psychological scars caused by the War”, something that is also strongly reflected in the space in which all these fragmented characters struggle to coexist. For Andrea, the flat on Calle de Aribau is suffocating and rotting, covered in cobwebs, filled with shadows and skeletons of the past; she steps into another cage, as she finds herself surrounded by “perverse people and furniture” (Laforet 9).

The flat on Calle de Aribau claims a larger-than-life character in its own right, it has a pulse of its own, exhibiting the profoundly disturbing notion that not even the home is safe, and its inhabitants are prisoners within its walls (and, by extension, prisoners within themselves and of each other). In the novel, the threat comes from within, not only from what exists in the world outside; the private sphere is a contorted version of the public sphere. Ultimately, the house in the novel is a Gothic trope.

Angustias, Andrea’s aunt, bestows on herself the role of the Matriarch, forcing her beliefs and the traditions on her niece. Angustias takes it upon herself to force Andrea into obedience and submission by imposing on her niece the patriarchal tradition that was once imposed on her. The

day after Andrea arrives, Angustias tells her that “a young girl in Barcelona must be like a fortress” (Laforet 14). Chown (104) offers her critic on this quite common phenomenon: “Mothers and older women are frequently described as perpetuators of repressive values, inhibitors of youthful struggles for freedom”.

Andrea is already a guarded heroine, a distant narrator, and a wary observer; these are the results of the circumstances under which the girl has grown up in as well as of the events she has experienced. She expresses throughout the novel the need to escape from situations, spaces and people, while her constant physical hunger represents her emotional hunger for freedom, protection and affection.

Nada is a retrospective novel, narrated in the first person and through stream of consciousness. Similar to a number of novels by young Spanish women writers during the postwar period, the protagonist is an adolescent girl, yearning for social autonomy and personal growth, while “confronting the social restrictions of conservative families during the Civil War and the postwar period” (Bergmann & Herr 6).

In the end, although Andrea cares for her broken relatives at Calle de Aribau, and has often ironically acted as a mother figure to them all, she decides to escape that house by leaving them all behind and moving to Madrid with Ena, a friend she met at the university.

References

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LANGUAGE: Spanish / Español

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