

## REPRESENTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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In the late years of 20<sup>th</sup>. century and within the frames of Postmodernism there was a growing interest for revising and rewriting the biographies of some visionaries and scholars who devoted their lives to the Church. These revisions give the mystic visions and the works of the nuns and saints under study new and wider scopes other than the religious, and are very challenging reinterpretations of their autobiographical experiences for the critics involved in gender studies. The novels of Joan Ohannesson: *Scarlet Music*<sup>1</sup>, Josefina Molina's *En el umbral de la hoguera*<sup>2</sup>, Michele Roberts's *Impossible Saints*<sup>3</sup> and Carmel Bird's *The White Garden*<sup>4</sup> throw new lights on the lives of the Medieval nun Hildegard of Bingen, on Teresa of Ávila, who lived in the Spain of the Inquisition, and on Therese of Lissieux, the 19<sup>th</sup>. century French saint.

Whether they are medieval or modern, European or colonial they all have in common a patriarchal upbringing that limited their education and led them to take the religious vows however different their circumstances had been. Similarly, the contemporary authors of these works belong to cultural backgrounds as different as the Australian, the British, the Norwegian or the Spanish, which shows that there exists a feminist commitment spread all over the world to rescue and re/create the biographies of these women that rebel against their destiny and reject the submission to the political, scientific or religious authorities.

These gendered historical reinterpretations have been plotted following varied modes of discourse and subsequently the final upshot is also different. Some tell us about their daily lives and the domestic problems these women had to face, whereas others use a highly elaborated discourse full of metaphors

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1. OHANNESSON, Joan: *Scarlet Music, Una luz tan intensa*, Barcelona, Ed. B., 1998.

2. MOLINA, Josefina: *En el umbral de la hoguera*, Barcelona, Ed. Martínez Roca, 1999.

3. ROBERTS, Michele: *Impossible Saints*, London, Little & Brown, 1997.

4. BIRD, Carmel: *The White Garden*, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1995.

and images that re/creates the world of the imagination. However varied these fictitious texts are, they are considered postmodernist and can be approached from the perspective of gender for the strength the subjects showed when trying to articulate their authority. The women who inspired these contemporary texts knew very wisely how to transgress and subvert their constrained existences in the cells and the cloisters of the convents and turned their contemplative and silent lives into forwarding and challenging undertakings. These characters find in their religious seclusion a space for self realisation that allows them to subvert the hierarchical authority: they know how to defy the patriarchal dictates and make of their private cells an open space of freedom and empowerment.

Feminist historians and theologians<sup>5</sup> have researched widely and deeply on the creation of patriarchy and on the importance of the reification of women's sexuality. Gerda Lerner explains that «it is not women who are reified and commodified, it is women's sexuality and reproductive capacity which is so treated»<sup>6</sup>. The control of their sexuality meant their psychological disadvantage against other groups of people. Another aspect, also connected with the aforementioned, which has been thoroughly studied, is the influence that Catholic religion exerted on women because they were the main victims in a society that sought to submit them for their own benefit, presenting the Virgin Mary as the paradigmatic example of renunciation, self-denial and desexualisation. This ideal, a mirror for Catholic girls according to patriarchal parameters, was the only way to achieve recognition in front of the religious authorities and consisted on renouncing their bodies and sensual appetites. As regards their fathers, husbands and brothers, this internalisation of the mariological model was also highly profitable because it ensured men's social superiority, sense of property and once again the control of women's sexuality.

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5. For this analysis the following sources have been used: ANDERSON, Bonnie & ZINSSER, Judith: *A History of Their Own* (1988). Traducción de Beatriz Villacañas, Barcelona, Crítica, 1991. This study analyses the history of women from a cronotopical approach and dedicates a very interesting chapter to «Religious Women». BASTIDA, Patricia: *Santas improbables: re/visiones de mitología cristiana en autoras contemporáneas*, Oviedo, KRK, Colección Alternativas, 1999 focuses her gender analysis of the Christian and feminist discourse applied to contemporary texts. CABALLÉ, Ana has coordinated the edition of a study in four volumes entitled *La vida escrita por las mujeres*, Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 2003. This work contains the most important biographical facts and excerpts of the literary work of these historical women, offering new views of their lives and works. DUBY, George & PERROT, Michelle in their *Storia delle Donne (Historia de las mujeres)* Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 1994 (1990-91-92) give an accurate analysis of the history of women in six volumes. All these sources have been thoroughly studied and are the ideological basis for this essay although they may not be quoted.

6. LERNER, Gerda: *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 213. Lerner is one of the critical mainstays in this study. Her two volume work *The Creation of Patriarchy* and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* conform her magnum opus *Women and History* (1986) and it is a necessary tool for any scholar interested in women's life and education. Her work offers the explanation for the historical framework of feminine subordination and the development of women's feminist consciousness.

It is clear that religion became a strong weapon to restrain women's sexual life outside marriage; whether they were offered as oblatas to thank God for the favours received, whether they were secluded in the monasteries to safeguard them in wartime or to apart them from the social life if they had a physical defect that made them unlikely candidates for marriage, religious women were desexualised. This desexualisation turned upside down and against men because there were historical periods in which convents and other enclaves for single women created some sheltered space, where women could function and retain their respectability. Therefore, it meant their empowerment far from the constraints that the married life exerted on the rest of women. Consequently, nuns and saints became stronger making their abbeys be more prosperous and their lands be well administered. They influenced in some political and ecclesiastical circles and they were owners of their bodies and minds in the solitude that the cells and the cloisters inspired.

Through their writings and out of the contemporary fictionalised biographies, we discover new sides of their existences. We know that they were deprived of their full lives as women, which, on the one hand, would have been impossible at that time when they were dependent on the protection of male kin. The outcome of all this was that they had to put aside their desires, passions and needs for the sake of the internalisation of Christian models, but, on the other hand, they were privileged and could develop a rich and subversive intellectual life as they enjoyed a life within the walls of the convents that women outside these cloisters could not dream of. They had the space and the time necessary to try to articulate their existences. Their lives were marked by the canonical hours and prays but for the rest of their daily living, it was devoted to the reading, the copying of texts, the meditation, and the development of their creative inspiration. This measure of time in the convents had more similarities with the public obligations conveyed by men than with the domestic responsibilities that the rest of women had in their married lives. Furthermore, religious women eluded all the reproductive and house duties, and this was one of their mainstays: the religious condition offered a protection to carry out enterprises that otherwise would be done by men.

The thread that binds these works together in this essay is based on the modes of discourse chosen by the different writers of these novels and on the negotiation of the space, which they managed to achieve in front of the authorities. The distinction that David Lodge establishes when he speaks of metonymy and metaphor suits very well the building of the works chosen for this analysis and the division of this essay into two parts. For the British critic «metaphor juggles with selection and substitution; metonymy juggles with combination and context»<sup>7</sup> Although there are varieties and nuances that report how these protagonist characters tried to articulate their voices out of several devices, the fictional works above mentioned may be framed into this

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7. LODGE, David: *Working with Structuralism*, London, Ark Paperback, 1986, p. 11.

categorisation: the authors of these biographies give their subject matters varied scopes by using different modes of writing. Ohanneson's and Molina's novels show an accurate and close to real life depiction of the problems Hildegard and Teresa faced. Carmel Bird's *The White Garden* or Michele Roberts's *Impossible Saints* offer metaphoric discourses that enrich even more the possibilities of interpreting the lives of the religious women. If the former reflect the external side of the difficult existence of these nuns that confronted the ecclesiastical authorities, managed to negotiate the tensions between the domestic and the public and knew how to combine the contemplative devotion with their active life inside and outside the cells, the latter (with their fissures, subtexts, deluded characters and exuberant figurative speech) create a profuse web of influences and cross-referencing that result in a dense and complex relationship. What is clear is that whatever the mode of discourse chosen, the subjects of these novels negotiated their space with the authorities openly or subversively.

### 1. STEPPING OUT OF THE CONVENT CELLS OR THE NEGOTIATION OF THE SPACE

If one of the mainstays of their independence was the authorisation they achieved, our consideration is that this was fulfilled with the control of the space, which they obtained individually and repetitiously. As Gerda Lerner says in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*: «women had been marginalised from the male tradition and largely deprived of knowledge of a female tradition, individual women had to think their way out of patriarchal gender definitions and their constraining impact as though each of them were a lonely Robinson Crusoe, reinventing civilization»<sup>8</sup>. They lacked group consciousness because they had been erased from history; in Lerner's words:

«Most significant of all the impediments toward developing group consciousness for women was the absence of a tradition which would reaffirm the independence and autonomy of women at any period in the past. There had never been any woman or group of women who had lived without male protection, as far as most women knew. There had never been any group of persons like them who had done anything significant for themselves. Women had no history-so they were told; so they believed. Thus, ultimately, it was men's hegemony over the symbol system which most decisively disadvantaged women.»<sup>9</sup>

It is certain that women had attempted to possess their own space repeatedly throughout the centuries whether out of their assertiveness whether through their artistic works and enterprises; however, this need was hardly achieved and it would not have been collectively recognised until the timing and the conditions were adequate. The independence for women, on which Virginia Woolf insisted in her essays, could only be obtained in the past by the women who did not take part in the marriage market and were desexualised

8. LERNER, Gerda: Op. Cit., p. 220.

9. LERNER, Gerda: *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 219.

at the eyes of men; moreover, women had been educationally marginalised and deprived of abstract thought, so it was a very hard task for them trying to convince their religious superiors of the authority they had received from God. They had to struggle with insistence on their capacity for thinking, for administering the land and for educating and organising nuns from other communities. They wanted to speak out the word of God and bring up more and more women under this Catholic and contradictory shelter. This protection apparently controlled their existences but at the same time meant a challenge that the rest of women would not reach until 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

*Scarlet Music* by Ohanneson narrates the life of Hildegard of Bingen from when she was taken to the abbey as oblate. The narration of her arrival at the convent would scare any woman nowadays, as it shows the inevitability of the young girl's fate, which the parents accept and consent to:

«-Let me go! -she cried while Jutta remained knee-bent.

The woman took her two small hands in hers and tried to kiss them while she shook weeping.

At the bottom of the slope, far away, her parents stopped to look at the ermit for the last time. At the top of the mountain they could recognise two little arms and hands with frenzy movement, as if they were the wings of a scared butterfly.

-MyLord! - she exclaimed with trembling voice- MyLady! You have forgotten me. You have forgotten to take me back home!»<sup>10</sup>

Hildegard grew stronger after years of tears and learning, enclosed with her *magistra* Jutta. Throughout her life, and due to this early enclosure, she suffered from severe illnesses that could only be mitigated when she travelled to different monasteries. What Ohanneson emphasizes in her work is how Hildegard empowered herself by showing to her authorities the need to speak out her word. She called herself «God's little trumpet», which gave her the authority to preach as she «had received» this gift from God through mystic revelations. This power allowed her to travel far and wide. At the same time that she visited other religious women explaining the gospels, she told the nuns about their rights on the administration of the properties obtained from subsequent dowries. Ohanneson also tells us how Hildegard used to visit the Bishop of Maguncia claiming a piece of land where she could found a new convent and how she faced the ecclesiastical hierarchy demanding the dowry of her nuns. The quotation from *Scarlet Music* explains clearly that religious women did not have any property rights and it shows Hildegard's view about this lack of authority imposed by men:

«-I must build an abbey for my nuns'

-'But you have *one already*», replied the monk with an expression of astonishment, «an abbey that *protects* you'.

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10. OHANNESSON, Joan: Op. cit., p. 39. My translation.

- 'From what?' she inquired with an angry look, 'from knowing how to administer the land?' (...) I cannot tolerate it any longer. This monastery is too small for us; it does not satisfy our need'<sup>11</sup>.

If Hildegard undertook these economic confrontations with her superiors, Josefina Molina in *En el umbral de la hoguera* shows a similar and assertive characterisation of Teresa of Ávila. The Spanish nun from the Inquisitorial time set out burdensome expeditions across gorges and ridges in search for the most appropriate location for new convents that most of the times were founded in an illegal way at night. Molina's work is centred on the foundations of convents. Prosecuted by their superiors who saw how this rebellious woman managed to do her will, the novel explores this side of her life. Ohanneson and Molina write about the real enterprises these nuns handled and is well known and accepted that Hildegard bound herself to those commitments and that Teresa looked forward to founding houses where the nuns of her congregation could live plentiful lives. Both writers offer a mimetic representation of what the existences of these women must have been; in this sense their works are realistic, but with their contemporary commitment and authorship, they show that these nuns could be considered early feminists since the speaking characters appear as disobedient, assertive and strong willed when facing the hierarchical authority and that the negotiation of the space is one of their mainstays in the convent life.

Hildegard and Teresa knew how to articulate their «voices» by being assertive in front of the authority. They did so with the only device they had: subverting the contemplative life of the cell with the mystic visions that ordered them to step out of the convents and preach the word of God. Lerner has studied on the origin of these drives and fits and says that religious women were prone to feel revelations from God in the manner of visions and fits since they had internalised the models that imagery depicted in the churches, the Bible and the sacred manuscripts to which they may have had access, in addition to the contemplative life they led in the private spheres of the monasteries: «Mysticism asserted that transcendent knowledge came not as a product of rational thought but as a result of a way of life, of individual inspiration and sudden revelatory insight»<sup>12</sup>.

They stepped out of the convent cells, travelled far and wide and they wrote down literary works and treatises on several fields of research. In a time when authority to women was utterly denied «Hildegard's achievement was possible because God «spoke to her» and she made those around her believe it and know it»<sup>13</sup>. She based the strength of her voice in the visions she received from God and she used them for her own purpose, as when in 1148 she had a vision telling her to found a new convent, which was to be denied by Abbot

11. Ibid., p. 159. My italics.

12. LERNER, Gerda: *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness...*, op. cit., p. 66

13. Ibid., p. 52.

Kuno causing her to fall into severe illness. She was also allowed to write down treatises on the sexuality of women that otherwise would be rejected by the ecclesiastical hierarchy were she not a woman with such a psychological strength. Similarly Teresa based her self-authorisation in the mystic visions which combined with political and public concerns and the physical illnesses that accompanied her throughout her life.

Teresa and Hildegard empowered themselves through the mysticism and the visions; they knew how to convince the authorities of their needs to spread the word and the work of God and were privileged in their ability to free themselves from traditional gender-roles since by living as part of a female community they enjoyed a «free space». They owned their time and their bodies, as Cristina Segura says in her essay<sup>14</sup>. The freedom that the convent life and the absence of women's domestic and reproductive responsibilities conveyed was greater for them; they knew how to transgress the rules of the convents by travelling and being powerful religious leaders in institution-building, in writing to and visiting the ecclesiastical authorities, as well as in speaking out their mystic visions and preaching. These were the escapes Hildegard and Teresa had: the former made the authorities believe that she had received special gifts from God and had been elected to exhort the Christians publicly and to found monasteries for women, whereas the latter developed a strong interior life by means of mysticism and literature and also thought necessary the foundation of more feminine convents.

This authority may have been unconscious, after the internalisation and the transformation of the models represented, or conscious, since by adopting the already internalised models and the biblical teaching that imputed them as weak and humble they subverted them and became strong by making everyone believe that they had received «the voice». In *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* Lerner referring to Bynum points out that this authority came precisely because women were denied active roles in the institutionalised church. The self-authorisation they received by means of mysticism allowed them to step out of the convent cells and gain a position in the public life, to the point that they focused all the attention on the side of the hierarchical authorities who saw them as dangerous examples to be followed by other women.

Similarly, the severe illnesses they suffered were embodiments of their victimisation and deprivation as women. Because they lived in a sexed body and in a gendered society, these were not only physical but also psychological diseases: a subverted way of escaping from the contemplative life that the cell provided and an illustration of their self-authority. As Showalter says quoting Micale: «[hysteria] is not a disease; rather it is an alternative physical, verbal, and gestural language, an iconic social communication»<sup>15</sup>. Hildegard made use of it as a device to be taken into account; she convinced Abbot Kuno of

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14. SEGURA, Cristina: «Las celdas de los conventos» in *Por mi alma os digo*, a herstory of women, Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 2003, pp. 11-120.



Disinbodenberg to grant her request to found a new monastery when she was severely ill and Teresa was so marked by different illnesses along her life that this was considered as a divine signal and she was allowed to travel and find locations for her nuns, as long as this activity relieved her of her physical pains. There are a lot of examples of this sort of subversion, and not only among those who were considered to be so highly illuminated by God: in Molina's novel there is the example of a wealthy lady that wanted to found a school for girls and that when the school was forbidden by the ecclesiastical authorities and had to close down the benefactress became severely ill. This sort of subversion proves that behind the spatial negotiation there is a transgressive attitude and a means of empowerment.

## 2. BETWEEN THE BED AND THE WALL OR THE SUBVERSION OF THE SPACE

If Ohanneson's and Molina's work approach a metonymical discourse and show this external side of the lives of saints, Roberts' and Bird's focus on the metaphorical subversion that some religious characters carried out in the solitude of the cells.

Teresa wrote her biography *Vida/Life* following the advice of her superiors to escape inquisition, as both Roberts and Molina maintain in their works, and this mode of subversion appears in both texts. These authors approach the biography of Teresa with different aims and whereas in Molina's work the emphasis is centred on the strong-headed character that managed to disobey her superiors and make her own will, Roberts' novel emphasises how biased and fragmented her official biography was. She offers a subversion of the history of Teresa by means of fissures, making the character write her life in tiny pieces of paper that rolled up around the thin cord on which her rosary was strung would be the legacy for her niece.

*Impossible Saints* is a historiographic and gender fiction of the lives of a group of saints, alternating with the fiction on Teresa/Josephine. All the stories are independent, and apparently there is not a link that connects them all, but going into the gaps and reading between the lines, you realise that there exists a thread that binds all the stories together. Roberts intertwines Teresa's biography and the lives of saints so that the readers understand how the religious models had been deeply internalised. The metaphoric mode of discourse is achieved with highly elaborated links that lay underneath that distorted and fragmented appearance. From the very first page the readers know what sort of fiction they have in their hands. When you start the reading of the introduction 'A Golden House' and you step down into this «golden chamber, where the bones were kept» (Roberts: 1)<sup>16</sup> you realise that, as reader, you have to try to «build the skeleton» and look for the clues that help with the understanding of the novel. There will be many different stories from saints and several lives lived

15. SHOWALTER, Elaine: *Hystories*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 7.

16. ROBERTS, Michele: Op. cit., p. 1.



by Josephine/Teresa behind the official one. You only have tiny bits of those biographies, fragmented pieces that contemporary readers have to put together to read her life against the grain, because Josephine transgressed the fathers' command to write her biography when she wrote a second one twenty years later:

«Twenty years later Josephine decided to write a second *Life*. As she had lived a secret life, so she would write one. This second book would be like the sister of the first, a younger sister kept shut up, about whom little or nothing is known. She does not appear in the biographies. Her absence is glossed over, no gap showing, no ripple to mark the trace of her passing. Her footsteps in the story are smoothed out and filled in. Yet, all the time she's there, breathing quietly under the surface of the prose, poking her finger through from time to time, like a ghost longing to be let in.»<sup>17</sup>

This second biography was written in the solitude of the cell, in the free time that the prayers and the religious duties allowed. In this way the fictitious Josephine subverted the time devoted to reflection. She elaborated a highly transgressive rosary without the crux, made with tiny beads that contained the fragments of her life. Isabel, narrator and niece to Josephine was the heiress, «she knew that she was looking at the first sheet of Josephine's secret *Life* ... *I wrote my first book under obedience*. The beads were spindle shaped ... bubbles of narrative that burst in all directions»<sup>18</sup>. Isabel is so excited when she realizes of what she has in her hands that starts opening the beads without any order; the result is that all the narrative has been spilled across the floor, spread over and once again Teresa's life will appear as inarticulated and biased. She was able to negotiate her space by writing her official life while she owned a secret one, but the complete truth of this reinterpretation of her biography will never be known. This is the purpose of the postmodernist fiction; it is not Roberts' aim to offer «the truth», but «a truth» different to the religious and canonical: a story that speaks of an inarticulated woman who suffered a lot in life, that was sent to the convent at the age of fifteen and was not given other options in her life.

The different sorts of subversions that, either conscious or unconscious, all the saints offer in Roberts' novel make these stories interesting and forwarding for their study from feminist approaches. They show to what extent women, but in particular the adolescent girls that took the veil out of the earnestness of their parents or of their own, were the victims of the patriarchal attitudes that imposed the models of obedience and self-denial on women. Once they had achieved adulthood they rebelled against the lack of election and the estrangement they had been victims of and developed their authorisation by subverting their lives in the convents and in the privacy of their cells. They stepped out of them and became empowered women out of their assertiveness and strong will.

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17. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

*The White Garden* is another example of the importance of the metaphorical mode of discourse because it tells us how the characters may show a transgression in a written text. Carmel Bird's characters also rebel against the submission that patriarchy imposes on women. In the novel, Bird draws the attention of the readers on the unfulfilled desires of women, as a consequence of the education received that obliged them to renounce their bodies. The characters have internalised the personalities of paradigmatic saints that fused them with their owns, resulting in a profuse web of intertextuality that involves all the women in the novel. Bird gives the female characters Rosamund Price Jones and Therese Gillis and their surrogate selves Teresa of Ávila and Therese of Lissieux voices and personalities enabling them to struggle for their articulation in the small and contained world of a Psychiatric Clinic. By means of adopting the surrogate selves of these Catholic saints the characters subvert the personalities of the women they stand for and enjoy the status of deluded women. It is in this small world of delusion where they are the owners of their space. In the solitude of the cell, they will be able to speak out all their unsatisfied desires and needs by letting their subconscious outburst their passionate experiences. The possibility of articulating their selves in the shadow lands of delusion, in the privacy of their rooms and in the open-air white garden without showing any overt signs of assertiveness, but being highly disobedient, makes this novel very challenging and forwarding for the gender studies.

The overcharged symbolism of the mental house as a place of seclusion is embodied and carried out by Goddard, the director of the hospital and the person who controls the lives of the insane ones; there, the women are tied to their beds and the male power is reinforced by the jargon of psychiatry and the mystery surrounding the medical practices. This symbolic order which tries to structure all «their thoughts, intellect and visions to conform with patriarchal values and power»<sup>19</sup> opposes to the limitless possibilities that the female characters show. The mad women construct their own subversive language system and feel free from the patriarch's clutches in their *white garden* and in the solitude of their rooms. The deluded and naïve embodiments of the nuns and their world allow them to develop their own imaginative fantasies in the intimacy of their cells, between the bed and the wall, as one of the chapters reads, or in the white garden, built on the premises of the clinic where they construct their own transgressor language system as Julia Kristeva explains in *Desire in Language*<sup>20</sup>.

According to Kristeva's theory of language and to the construction of subject identity, there exists a language in the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and child which provides and remains the foundation of all language. In the preverbal semiotic phase «the child has acquired no sense of separate identity:

19. WALKER, Shirley: *Australian Women's Writing*, New England, UNE partnerships, 1996, p. 91.

20. KRISTEVA, Julia: *Desire in Language*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980.

its physical experience is part of a continuum with the maternal body»<sup>21</sup>. Once the language is acquired the child enters the symbolic order, which is the aspect of language that the child directs towards the object world of other people and things. As regards *The White Garden*<sup>22</sup>, Kristeva's critical theory gives the readers the clue for the understanding of the novel, because there is a confrontation between Goddard and his wishes to control the characters and the way the female characters behave. The symbolic is imposed through the different therapies and myriads of different pills he obliges them to take in order to master the women, but the characters develop their own code with their religious anxiety developed out of the internalisation of the models.

Bird elicits the complex world of the female characters in the novel by taking as the backdrop for her novel Vita Sackville-West and the white garden that her husband let her build in Sissinghurst to relieve all her anxieties and sexual misfits. Vita worked in her garden with a will, as a response to her hazardous and unaccepted life and her inarticulated position on a male dominant society. With this information in mind the «white garden» in Bird's novel is the metaphorical space, far from the male gaze, where the female characters and their religious icons solace, take refuge or empower through delusion. Bird handles very skilfully, in a chapter entitled «between the bed and the wall», how the world of the imagination cannot be snatched away from women to the point that this tiny space of the cell becomes their space to confront the patriarchal authority represented by Goddard.

Kristeva's idea of *jouissance* as «total joy or ecstasy» as well as her interpretation of the colours that she defines as: «the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression ... it is through colour- colours- that the subjects escapes its alienation within a code»<sup>23</sup> come to be very useful when interpreting this novel from a feminist approach. The garden in Bird's novel symbolises the female world as an open exhibition of their creativity. Apparently, it is the physical space that anyone can see and enjoy. However the images of the «white garden» on which all the novel is spun have multiple connotations that refer to the unfulfilled and misapprehended desires, needs and passions that women in general, but religious ones in particular, had to smother. All these wishes codified with colours cannot be perceived by people in general, they are only understood by these characters that have empowered themselves silently, musing their wishes in the space between the bed and the wall. This is their way to feel stronger and to subvert the obligations and rules imposed by Goddard. They make him believe that there is subordination and madness in their acts; but it is not submission, it is subversion. The white garden is the only open space they are allowed to go and where they take the

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21. Kristeva in MORRIS, Pam: *Literature and Feminism*, Oxford, Basil and Blackwell, 1995, p. 144.

22. This phrase will appear in italics or inverted commas, depending on where it refers to the title of the novel or to the space created by women.

23. KRISTEVA, Julia: *Desire in Language*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 221.

personifications of the internalised models of saints, since religion is the only way to escape from Goddard's clutches:

«A White Garden doesn't mean you just go mad with the white flowers ... it is all a matter of light and shade and dark greens and light greens and silvers and greys. The overall impression is a sort of shimmering whiteness»<sup>24</sup>

«The white garden» is then an epitome of the representation of female freedom and triumph. This reference to the «light and shade» evokes the threshold site in the mind between the conscious and the unconscious that allows women to enjoy and recreate the experiences, desires and impulses that patriarchy has not been able to choke<sup>25</sup>.

The characters from the novels analysed in this essay are all embodied representations of the very well known religious women, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse de Lisieux. They have had their share in the pages of history. But as the name indicates in the English language, that was *history*, the historical facts that men understood, handled, wrote and made public with examples of suffering, abnegation and self-denial for other women to follow.

The works that these contemporary authors have written are all fictitious reinterpretations of their lives, their concerns, the troubles they may have had with the religious authorities and the restlessness they may have felt with the internalisation of religious models. The need to have a room of their own made these contemporary authors imagine these women trying to convince the authorities to let them step out of the convents, to allow them to spread the word of God far and wide, to consent to the foundation of convents for other nuns and to agree to let them develop their creativity in the solitude of their cells.

They have all enjoyed that «white garden», that space of shade and light to transgress and subvert the patriarchal impositions. Ohannesson's and Molina's reinterpretations show how the lives of their characters have had shades and lights that they managed to transgress by negotiating the space and by empowering themselves with the administration of the land, a space that historically was in the hands of men.

Roberts' character, Josephine, knew how to hide her secret life with the hope that there would be a future heiress to whom she could give her legacy. That heiress character cannot articulate her inheritance completely, as there are aspects of her life nobody will know, but the readers nowadays have the tools to understand her thoughts and reinterpret her biased biography. As regards Bird's characters, they knew how to subvert the organised and controlled life of the mental house. Goddard wanted to control them, but he was defeated. He could master their daily routine with the timing of the pills and the sleeping hours, but he could not dominate their thoughts, their dreams, their visions

24. BIRD, Carmel: *The White Garden...*, op.cit., p.18.

25. In Rodríguez Fernández: «Carmel Bird's *The White Garden*: symbols and images in a space of their own», *Journal of English Studies*, 2 (2000), pp. 79-92.

and their drives. There have always been ways of escaping from the cultural construction of gender and religious women were one of the first, if not the first, that knew how to create the paths and gardens for self-realisation and authorisation in the contained and protected world of the convents.

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