

# *Si te dicen que caí*: A Chronicle of Post-Civil War Spain

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During the Franco Regime in Spain (1939-1975), many novels were published which had as their theme the Spanish Civil War and its violent aftermath. All of those novels were in some way or another affected by political bias and the constrictions of censorship. For the most part they were realistic treatises, many employing the Manichean tenets of the so-called "social realist" novel, especially prevalent during the decades of the 50s and 60s in Spain. The majority of these simplistic novels of victims and victimizers became the target of fierce criticism and were later tossed into the bin of oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1960s, Spanish novelists were looking toward their Latin-American contemporaries for ways to revitalize their prose. They did not, for the most part, abandon the themes that had obsessed them for years, but rather sought a new style in which to express their social criticism, finding their models in the works of authors like Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez. Juan Marsé, like his contemporaries, had written several realist novels which dealt with desperate characters who had lived through the demoralizing years immediately following the Spanish Civil War. This is true of, for example, *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (*All Alone with Just One Toy*; 1961) and *Esta cara de la luna* (*This Side of the Moon*; 1962). But in 1973, Marsé published one of the most polemical novels of contemporary Spanish letters, *Si te dicen que caí* (*The Fallen*), which was censored in Spain until 1976, though it was published in Mexico in 1973 and won the Novela Mexico prize that year. Marsé was accused by both the right and the left in Spain of political bias, but he denied any political intention whatsoever, explaining that the novel was above all, a "stroll through his childhood" that required a sociopolitical backdrop. Marsé, in fact, can be considered a chronicler of the postwar period because of the innovative stylistic techniques he utilized in *Si te dicen que caí*, which allowed him to create a totalizing vision of the plight of the defeated sector after the Spanish Civil War.

*Si te dicen que caí*, like its Latin-American counterparts, is an exercise in ambiguity, which explains why it has enjoyed such diverse political interpretations. It is a complex mixture of myth, historical facts, and the author's memories of which appear to be those of a mind in a state of hallucination. It is composed of four stories that take place in the 1940s in Barcelona, and which are intricately interwoven. The principle narrative vehicle is that of the "voices" of a gang of hungry street urchins who tell the "stories" they have heard. These narratives include fictionalized chronicles of, first of all, their own gang, but also a guerrilla resistance group known as the *maquis* which Franco finally obliterated in the early 50s, the life of Carmen Broto, a woman tenaciously pursued by the Franco Regime after the war and assassinated in 1949, and a group of Franco sympathizers which divided its energies between Christian charity and the persecution and liquidation of the enemies of the Regime.

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<sup>1</sup>Included among these novels are *La piqueta* by Antonio Ferrer (1959), *La mina* by Armando López Salinas (1960) and *La zanja* (1961) by Alfonso Grosso.

The characters—all antiheroes—serve as vehicles for describing, criticizing, and exposing the sociopolitical horrors caused by the Franco Regime. The gang members, called the *kabileños*, have learned the lessons of war violence and entertain themselves by reenacting scenes they have heard described. The *maquis* are the embodiment of the desperation and demoralization prevalent among the ranks of the resistance after the war. The story of Carmen Broto—called Aurora Nin in the novel—illustrates the tragic destiny of women who had lost their men in the war, and serves as an impetus for the actions of the Franco sympathizers, who are, in turn, the vehicle for criticizing the government and the Catholic Church in their roles as oppressors.

The *kabileños* and their feminine counterpart, girls from the orphanage “Las Animas,” belong to the indigent and defeated Barcelona sector, which Marsé has so often described in his novels and where he spent his childhood. The central character Java, as head of the gang, is a modern version of the *pícaro*, the popular rogue character of seventeenth-century Spanish novel. Yet Java is more cruel and dangerous than the Baroque rogue. His similar aim, to rise above the misery of his class, is complicated by the moral and material putrefaction of Spanish society at the time. All the *kabileños* are ragged, hungry, perverted by the violence which surrounds them, and above all, by the terrifying stories they hear each day. Along with the orphan girls, they serve as a mirror for the horrors of the war and the vengeance of the postwar period. The girls—victims and accomplices of the *kabileños*—permit themselves to be utilized by the gang for their perverted games. The diabolical influence of the anti-hero Java corrupts the other children. Also, Java is the central link of this group with the others, and is the protagonist of many of the stories they tell. Along with Aurora Nin, he provides the only cohesiveness in the novel.

The narrative mechanism of *Si te dicen que caí*—the *aventi*—was invented by Marsé and his childhood friends for telling stories; as he explains in the novel, it was “a cheap game that without a doubt was the consequence of the scarcity of toys, but also a reflection of the memory of disaster, a silent echo of the din of the battle.”<sup>2</sup> The *aventi* is a potpourri of true facts and rumors that Marsé heard as a child; it also has as ingredients fictitious elements from films and comic books, all of these filtered through the imagination of children who had lived through the hallucinatory experiences of war-torn Spain.

The *aventi* is a masterful method for providing the reader with an ambiguous vision of reality as perceived by war survivors who had experienced scenes so violent that they no longer seemed real. Reality becomes, through their imaginations, a protean and elusive substance wherein illusion and reality are one and the same. In *Si te dicen que caí*, Marsé brings back that timeless question that Cervantes had presented to Western literature centuries before. In describing the *aventi* in *Si te dicen* Marsé writes: “The best ones were those that had no beginning or end, those that one didn’t need to force oneself to believe. Nothing then made sense anyway. In reality, their fantastic *aventis* fed on a world which was much more fantastic than that imagined by them” (p. 37). The ambiguity and confusion of these stories underline the fact, according to Marsé, that the truth is unattainable. Reality is in a state of constant change and the version that each character can offer is also in evolution. This effect is augmented by the confusion of time: the 1940s and the ’60s and ’70s are constantly juxtaposed in the minds of the characters and in their narratives so that historical time is frequently woven into imagined time in the novel. This chronological confusion is achieved through the monologues of the

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<sup>2</sup>Juan Marsé, *Si te dicen que caí*, 7th ed. (Mexico: Editorial Novaro, S. A., 1976), p. 36. Subsequent quotations are from this edition; my translation.

principal narrator of the *aventis* called Sarnita (pock-face) as a child, and Nito, who is an undertaker, as an adult. We are never sure if Sarnita-Nito is speaking from his childhood or from his present state, or if it is really he who is speaking at all. He is the most radical of unreliable narrators, since, "What happened to the undertaker . . . was as though it had rained in his memory and it had suffered a landslide . . ." (p. 336).

Marsé reveals his acute perception of the unwieldiness of reality by his disregard for verisimilitude. He provides multiple versions of his characters; the *maquis*, for example, are portrayed as courageous guerrillas, yet they are suddenly converted into vulgar thieves and even assassins. The objective of these confusing elements is clearly stated by Marsé in an interview: "I was trying to give that impression of ambiguity and confusion . . . That was the reality that we lived in Spain then. After the war, events, people, communal life, became terribly ambiguous: lack of information, the disappearance of people. It was the time of social, political, cultural, all kinds of repression; a time of misery, hunger. Therefore, in order to express it somehow, they 'told' many stories, people tried to reconstruct a reality which was being falsified for them."<sup>3</sup>

The most mysterious character in the novel is Aurora. She is also referred to as Ramona in the story and passes through dramatic metamorphoses within the stories narrated and filtered through the collective memory of the *kabileños*. She is alternately described as a bombshell with turban and sunglasses who works as a call girl, a dowdy housewife, an emaciated prostitute who reeks of vinegar, and, in the end, the gang remembers her as a "blurred figure behind some red and green screen, a shadow that did not permit one to see if she was wearing a turban or a bandage on her head . . ." (p. 332). Even more disconcerting than her names and the radically diversified descriptions of her is the confusion of her life with that of a prostitute from the Ritz Hotel. They both die tragically, it seems, and they both are wearing a gold scorpion. Are they the same character? There is no answer to that question; it is, given Marsé's objectives, quite irrelevant.

Marsé heightens the sense of duality and/or duplicity of his characterizations through the use of theatrical motifs. Conrado, a former military officer of the Franco forces is now a paralytic director of religious theatre for the children at the local parish house. Yet Conrado is also a voyeur who pays Java and Aurora Nin to enact sexual scenes which he carefully stages and observes from another room. The scenes of torture reenacted by the *kabileños* and carried out with the orphan girls, are described by a nun, Sor Paulina, who as a child accidentally witnessed one of the scenes, confusing it with the religious theatre they performed under the direction of the paralytic voyeur. Theater and reality become confused in the eye of the beholder; reality and illusion, we are reminded, are once again fused into one, and nothing is as it seems to be.

The concept of collective memory is used by Juan Marsé in *Si te dicen que caí* as a vehicle for expressing his own sense of chaos and confusion vis-à-vis his memories of the 1940s. He is also concerned with providing a total picture of the injustices of the war, the illness, prostitution, repression, spying, and the general misery which he has vehemently admitted: ". . . my novel is the vomiting of a child-adult who attempts to—and I think he achieves it—free himself from the fear and disgust, the filth, physical and spiritual and moral filth, of some precise years, that contaminate everyone and therefore turn out to be infinitely more unpleasant than a

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<sup>3</sup>Tununa Mercado, "Juan Marsé: la novela como testimonio de la memoria colectiva," *Diorama de la cultura. El Excelsior*, n.d., n.pag.

historical and more or less respectful exposition.”<sup>4</sup> Marsé seeks to provide a totalized vision of the social degradation of Spain and, more specifically, Barcelona, in those years. All the characters have been corrupted by the atmosphere of violence and mistrust. There is no salvation for anyone. He maintains the same deterministic focus in *Si te dicen que caí* that he does in his other novels. The atmosphere that closes in on the characters permits no other destiny than the slow but certain erosion of their ideals, the loss of faith in mankind and the impossibility of vindication. The structure of the novel is dictated by the very determinism of his message: it begins by describing the death of Java as an adult and anticipates the tragic end of Aurora and others. The reader knows the outcome of the novel in the first chapter before recognizing who those characters are. As in all the novels of Marsé, all traitors—and even those that have been unwillingly tainted by a corrupt society—must be punished. The phrase most often repeated in Marsé’s novels: “Esto no puede durar” (This can’t last) reveals the painful truth: that this tragic situation could last and it did last for forty years, which Marsé clearly expressed in the novel: “And to think that at the beginning everyone said this couldn’t last, that it wouldn’t endure, without suspecting that the echo of their words would drag on for thirty years to be heard by the deaf ears of their grandchildren” (p. 59).

The other historical references to the postwar period are informed by an equally chaotic and demonic world, a world “abandoned by god,” populated only by people who were lost in the holocaust, as Sarnita describes it: “Everyone is looking for someone lately . . . check it out: news of some relative who has disappeared or in hiding or dead. You’ll always see someone walking around crying looking for someone.” (p. 70).

An air of espionage permeates the novel, bringing to mind the most fanatical years of the Spanish Inquisition. Denunciation is everywhere, Marsé tells us. He does this by having all the actions of the novel, or nearly all of them, transpire in clandestineness. It is a fratricidal world where no one is safe, a world which obliges the characters to conceal themselves or mask their identities for some reason. Only characters like “El Tuerto” (the one-eyed man)—known as the “Great Inquisitor”—is recognized for what he is, given his unequivocal role as a vehicle of the State for repression and terror.

Marsé heightens the ambience of espionage in the novel by utilizing a voyeuristic technique. The many sexually aberrant scenes in the novel are viewed from a peephole or hiding place without the knowledge of those participating. In this way, the reader becomes an accomplice to the voyeur, since he is experiencing the scenes through the eyes of the observing character. (Often the novel borders on the pornographic, but Marsé transcends any such interpretation through his moralistic exhibition of the explicitly perverted, painful, and degrading quality of the scenes.)

In spite of the ambiguity of characters and plot, and the chaotic nature of time in the novel, Marsé frames his fictitious characters within a specific and accurate setting by utilizing the Barcelona of his childhood. He portrays the power-wielding institutions of the Franco Regime through the dehumanized descriptions of the characters; for example, “El Tuerto” and Conrado are both grotesque embodiments of the State, just as an effeminate bishop who takes a fancy to Java, represents a mordant comment on the Church. Also, Marsé extracts elements from the popular culture of the times to provide a more impressionistic picture of the social milieu of the times. He employs songs—the title of the novel is, in fact, the first part of a hymn of the Franco forces—to remind the reader of the period. He also alludes

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<sup>4</sup>“La última novela secuestrada,” *El Noticiero Universal*, Barcelona, 2 November 1976, p. 15.

to films that constituted the most popular diversion of the times, and interweaves them into the "facts" that are narrated by the characters. Because of Marsé's skillful use of these, and other, literary and artistic devices, *Si te dicen que caí* is not a simplistic example of the "social realist" novel of the '50s and '60s which had as its idealistic objective the political education of the masses. His sophisticated portrayal of postwar Spain can elicit no other response but despair. *Si te dicen que caí* is composed by an accomplished writer who is full of pent-up anger, and who utilizes his most fierce memories to startle his readers, to wound and offend them into awareness. It represents the culminating moment for the Spanish novel, which writers had attempted to use since the '50s as a vehicle for denouncing the Franco Regime. Even though Marsé did not envision *Si te dicen que caí* as a political statement, but rather as a vehicle for chronicling the postwar period and for describing the schizophrenic perception of reality in those years, his novel is one of the finest examples of political literature that has been written in contemporary Spain.