



Forbidden Voices: Resistance and Female Genealogy in *La Mari*¹

by Silvia Grassi

“There are men who struggle for a day, and they are good.
There are others who struggle for a year, and they are better.
There are some who struggle many years, and they are better still.
But there are those who struggle all their lives,
and these are the indispensable ones”.

Bertolt Brecht

This famous quote by Bertolt Brecht is an interesting starting point for this article. First of all, because it demonstrates that somehow not even the author of *The Antigone of Sophocles* was immune to the male-dominated imaginary that permeates left-wing resistance movements. Second, because *La Mari*, the miniseries which is the object of my analysis, is mainly about struggle. It tells the story of María, a woman who, after the

¹ *La Mari* is a four part mini-series broadcast by Catalan television. The first two parts, entitled “Alosno” (4 July 2003) and “Poble sec” (5 July 2003), are set between 1963 and 1975. The last two parts, entitled “Tornar a començar” (6 April 2010) and “L’únic camí” (13 April 2010), are set during the period of the Transición. The series was a success in terms of both critics and audience, since all the episodes obtained more than 30% of share. The miniseries can be watched for free in the on-line archive of Catalan television: <http://www.tv3.cat/lamari>.



death of her husband, leaves the Andalusian town where she has lived all her life to move to Barcelona: it is a story of political awakening and of the protagonist's struggle for independence, as a citizen and as a woman. In this journey of self-discovery, Mari is helped by other women through a network of friendship, solidarity and resistance, which reverses the stereotypes of female domesticity promoted during Franco's regime, as we can see in the following quotes taken from Pilar Primo de Rivera's speech at the 1938 Sección Femenina national conference:

Justa, disciplinada y abnegada, la falangista debe caracterizarse además por una alegre austeridad que la distinga de la finalidad atribuida a la mujer burguesa de los años anteriores a la guerra. Respetuosa de la prerrogativa masculina [...] La misión asignada por Dios a la mujer es la maternidad en el hogar; a este fin hemos de subordinar cuanto halle [...] Es decir, que su fin histórico lo cumplirá sin apartarse del fin natural que Dios le ha señalado, y en el cumplimiento de este fin acumulará méritos de vida eterna para salvar su alma² (1939).

This rhetoric clashes with the courage and initiative shown by many female characters in this mini-series, but also with the opinion expressed by some male characters, such as Robles, a militant of the Catalan Communist Party:

Mari: Mis padres querían un varón. Todos quieren un varón.

Robles: Yo, no. Yo prefiero las chicas. Sois más fuerte. Y aquí se necesita ser fuerte.³

Particular attention is given by the series to the relationships that Mari creates with those women that Emma Scaramuzza defines as "second or symbolic mothers" and to the passage of experiences and knowledge between generations of women which creates a "female genealogy":

La povertà materiale e l'arretratezza culturale determinata dalla soggezione a una podestà maritale che si univa alla *patria potestas* nel sancire la minorità giuridica ed economica delle donne, con gravissime limitazioni della libertà personale, trovarono un antidoto e una compensazione, nonché una fonte di risorse

² Besides from being righteous, disciplined and self-less, the falangist woman has to be characterised by a happy austerity which distinguishes her from the destiny assigned to the bourgeois woman before the Civil War. She must respect male prerogative. [...]The mission which God assigns to women is motherhood in the domestic realm; to this aim we have to subordinate whatever is needed [...] Which means that she will carry out her historic destiny without dismissing her natural one, which God has assigned to her, and in carrying out this destiny she will mount up merits for her eternal life to save her soul.

³ **Mari:** My parents wanted a boy. Everybody wants a boy.

Robles: I don't. I prefer girls. You are stronger. And here you need to be strong.



spirituali e pratiche, nella relazione con le “seconde madri”, donne alle quali veniva riconosciuto un di più di esperienza, di sapere e di autorità.⁴ (2004: 48)

As a matter of fact, Scaramuzza argues, it is not power, based on coercion that cements relationships among women, but authority in the sense of its etymological root of *augere*: enrich (2004: 20). Such authority, according to Marta Bertran Tarrés and María Milagros Rivera Garretas, sparks maieutically a process of personal development and growth (2000: 7-13), an authority that Luisa Muraro defines as “without monuments” (1994).

According to Scaramuzza, this network of friendship and solidarity “aiuta [...] ciascuna a radicarsi, a costruire appartenenza, a manifestare visibilità collettiva, di genere”⁵ (2004: 48). This remark of Scaramuzza’s acquires another layer of meaning if we apply it to the miniseries we are dealing with here. Indeed, not only does Mari have to overcome obstacles in the affirmation of her individuality as a woman in a context of a misogynist fascist dictatorship, but also those of an immigrant who moves from a small town to a big city, all against a background of the meeting and clash between cultures and languages.

I will now analyse some key moments of Mari’s journey of self-discovery and especially those key people that help her along the way.

The miniseries begins in 1963 in Alosno, a small town in the Andalusian province of Huelva. The town is enshrouded by a rarefied atmosphere and silence, which is suddenly broken by the news of an accident in the mine where almost all the town’s men folk work. When she reaches the mine, Mari finds out the her husband has died. This tragedy is the beginning of her journey: she is now the sole breadwinner of her family and faced with the impossibility of finding a job in her small town, she decides to separate from her two children to move to Barcelona. The first reaction in her encounter with the city is total disorientation and this is made visually evident by shooting Mari in the middle of the huge anonymous crowd in the Estació Terme, with trains and trams coming and going.

She is allocated accommodation in a monastery where she meets Reme, an Andalusian woman like her. Reme is only two years younger than Mari, but they seem almost from two different generations. She is the first person that allows Mari to see beyond the limited expectations which she was raised to believe were her only entitlement: “Nos han engañado, Mari”, she says. “La vida no es ni vestirse de luto, ni

⁴ Material poverty and cultural backwardness caused by the subjugation to a marital potestas, which together with the patria potestas sanctioned the juridical and economic minority of women, with great limitations of personal freedom, found an antidote and compensation, as well as a spring of spiritual and practical resources, in the relationships with the “second mothers”, women who were recognised a plus of experience, knowledge and authority.

⁵ Helps [...] each woman to root, construct a belonging, manifest a collective, gendered visibility.



pasar hambre. La vida es muy bonita, pa' disfrutar".⁶ Reme brings Mari to the restaurant, to see Sara Montiel's *La Dama de Beirut* (which includes a "shocking" love scene for Mari) and above all to see the sea.

Full of life, but also very naïve, Reme is made pregnant by a man who forces her to have an abortion. She goes to a clandestine clinic (a cold and dirty hole or, as Mari defines it, a "butcher"), and she dies as a consequence of the abortion. Reme is a victim of a society where not only abortion was illegal, but sexual education was non-existent: she gets pregnant because her lover convinced her that if she washed herself quickly after sexual intercourse, nothing would happen. However, father Riquelme, the priest at the monastery where Mari and Reme are living, expresses a different interpretation of the facts:

Esas chicas alegres y dicharacheras, que todos creíamos conocer, nunca existieron. Hoy, gracias a la muerte que todo lo revela, sabemos que Remedio García era la encarnación del pecado y que en el pecado ha muerto. En esta madrugada llena de lodo y vergüenza, ha regresado al Reino del Infierno del que había salido para tentarnos y llenarnos de oprobio y pecado. La falsa Remedio García, la pecadora, ha muerto víctima de la lujuria.⁷

After the priest's speech, Mari cries "Esto es mentira!"⁸ and rush off the church.

After this episode, Mari begins to question the religious dogmas she was taught since she was a child, also thanks to Robles and his wife, Amparo. However, the representation of the Church is far from simplistic. At Reme's funeral, Mari meets father Iván, a *cura de barrio*, a parish priest in the poor district of Verdun. Iván's discourse clashes sharply with the one pronounced by father Riquelme:

Mientras estuvo con nosotros, la Reme nos ayudó a vivir, a exprimir cada segundo del que disponemos. Por desgracia, nosotros no hemos podido ayudarla a morir. Pero no tengáis cuidado por la Reme porque tal y como van las cosas por aquí mal vale que nos preocupemos de nosotros mismos. Porque somos nosotros los que nos hemos quedado sin guía. Quién va enseñarnos ahora a reír, a soñar un poquito, a hacer planes imposibles? A creernos que nuestra vida vale la pena vivirla? Descansa Reme y desde donde estés sigue echándonos una mano.⁹

⁶ "We have been deceived, Mari". "Life is neither wearing mourning nor starving. Life is very nice, to be enjoyed".

⁷ That cheerful and talkative girl that we all thought we knew never existed. Today, thanks to death that everything unveils, we know that Remedio García was the incarnation of the sin and that in the sin she died. In this morning full of mud and shame, she has come back to Hell, from which she had come out to tempt us and fill us with opprobrium and sin. The false Remedio García, the sinner, died a victim of lust.

⁸ This is a lie!

⁹ While she was with us, Reme helped us live, squeeze every second at our disposal. Unfortunately, we couldn't help her die. But don't worry about Reme because, considering the situation we are in, we should worry about us. We are the ones who are left without a guide. Who is going to



Involved with anti-fascist resistance, Iván shows Mari the indecent living condition of other immigrants, the lack of sanitary healthcare, infrastructures, even sewers, awaking in her a consciousness of social and political injustice. Iván also finds her a job as a cleaning lady, and thanks to this job, Mari meets Genara, an old Andalusian woman, from Huelva, like her.

Genara helps to alleviate Mari's nostalgia. Showing Mari two flowerpots, one with soil from her town, the other with soil from Barcelona, she says: "Cuando se lleva fuera mucho tiempo, una aprende que la tierra es igual de buena en todas parte"¹⁰. More importantly, Genara performs for Mari the role of a symbolic mother. First of all, she makes her understand the importance of learning to read and write.

Aunque no te lo parezca Mari, esta mierda de mundo está cambiando y de aquí a na' si no sabes leer no te van a dejar ni fregar las escaleras.¹¹

Mari is initially reluctant. She feels she has no time to go to school and that she is too old to learn. Genara, however, pushes her until she accepts to join the evening classes for adults: "¡Lo que estamos haciendo aquí es muy importante, eh!",¹² she enthusiastically tells Mari at their first class. When Mari manages to write the first letter to her children, she asks Robles to correct it. Nonetheless, she feels ashamed and does not want to send it after all:

Mari: Me da apuro. No me sé expresar muy bien. Total, a lo mejor ni la voy a echar.

Robles: Te vas a cuidar de no echarla. Esa carta es muy importante, Mari. [...] No debes sentir vergüenza, Mari. Lo que has hecho es algo muy bonito. Al contrario, tienes que sentir mucha alegría. Y mucho orgullo.¹³

Emma Scaramuzza explains this sense of shame that women of past generations felt in writing as the uncertainty of occupying a symbolic space outside the domestic one: "Scrivere è un atto di autonomia, di affermazione di sé e di occupazione di uno spazio simbolico che non è soltanto personale, dato il carattere sociale della scrittura"¹⁴ (2004).

teach us to laugh, to dream a little, to do impossible plans? To make us believe that our life is worth living? Rest in peace, Reme, and wherever you are, keep giving us a hand.

¹⁰ When you live far from home for a long time, you learn that the land is good everywhere.

¹¹ It might not seem to you, Mari, but this shit world is changing. Tomorrow, if you can't read, they won't even let you cleaning stairs.

¹² What we are doing here is really important!

¹³ **Mari:** I feel embarrassed. I can't express myself very well. It doesn't matter, maybe I won't even send it.

Robles: Don't you dare, you must send it. This letter is very important, Mari. [...] You don't have to feel ashamed, Mari. You have done something really nice. By contrary, happiness is what you have to feel. And a lot of pride.

¹⁴ Writing is an act of autonomy, self-affirmation, of occupying a symbolic space, which is not only personal, due to the social dimension of writing.



The kind of relationship Mari establishes with Genera contrasts with the one Mari has with her mother, Rosa. Rosa resents her daughter for not coming to her father's funeral and she feels her daughter's behaviour and her relationship with Eric is disrespectful considering she is a widow.

Rosa: Eres una mujer viuda. Lo has olvidado?

Mari: No, no lo he olvidado, no. Llevo siete años durmiendo sola. Además, no se preocupe. Si algún día lo olvido, está usted para recordármelo. Porque yo soy esto para usted, verdad? Una viuda. Y ahí se ha acabado todo. [...] Porque no hago lo mismo que usted, no? Esto es lo que quiere? Que me quede en un rincón llorando viendo como pasa el tiempo mientras espero morirme?¹⁵

However, in a later scene, Rosa talks with Amparo, Robles' wife and another symbolic mother for Mari. The two women have a completely different mentality but they are bound together by the difficulties they had and have to face in life. Amparo lost her only son while he was doing the military service and her husband is in jail for his political activities, while Rosa confesses her: "Cuando mi madre morí, tenía nueve años, era la mayor de cinco hermanos y tuve que mirar por todos ellos. A dos de ellos tuve que amortajarlo. Lo mío no ha sido vida ni ha sido nada".¹⁶

Rosa also talks to Amparo about the difficult relationship she has with her daughter and the troubles they have to communicate with and understand one another. Therefore, Amparo and Genera represents for Mari that real and symbolic reference of struggle and resistance that her mother cannot provide to her.

Genera, for example, forces Mari to face the fear she feels towards rebellion and protest, the result of a repressive upbringing based on absolute obedience, and the importance of solidarity among the working class. After witnessing the beating up of a man by the police, Mari and Genera have this conversation:

Mari: No se tenía que haber metido en líos.

Genera: ¡Pero qué dices!

Mari: Los problemas no se resuelven protestando.

Genera: ¡No, se resuelven como tú, calladita! ¡Dentro de diez años ganarán la misma miseria que ahora. Lo que pasa es que los que sois como tú, pues tenéis esta ventaja, que hay otros que luchan por vosotros.

Mari: Por mí, nadie hace nada.

Genera: A lo mejor, el hombre que han detenido hoy estaba luchando para que tu tenga un salario más digno.

¹⁵ **Rosa:** You are a widow. Have you forgot?

Mari: No, I haven't forgot, no. I have been sleeping alone for seven years. Besides, don't worry. If one day I forget, there you are to remind me. Because that's what I am for you, right? A widow, and that's it. [...] Because I don't do exactly what you do. Is this what you want me to do? Staying behind these four walls, crying, watching time goes by, while I wait to die?

¹⁶ When my mother died, I was nine years old, I was the eldest of five siblings and I had to take care of them all. I had to shroud two of them. Mine has not been a life.



Mari: Mi padre decía que nosotras tenemos que ver, oír y callar.

Genara: ¡Tu padre está muerto y tú estás bien viva! Y tener miedo es una cosa muy mala.¹⁷

Genara introduces Mari to a resistance based on practical activism organised at a local level; for instance they found a neighbour association. During one protest organised by the district asking for the construction of the sewers, they suffer the repression of the police. Iván is beaten up and Mari defends him with her body. She then takes him to a corner to heal his bruises: "Tú no serás Agustina d'Aragón?", Iván asks her, in reference to the female historic figure, made an icon by Francoist mythology. "Yo soy Mari, la de Huelva",¹⁸ she replies, stating in this way her individuality and refusing any demagogic symbology.

When they decide to close themselves in a church to protest against the detention of some friends, Mari talks to Enric, the Catalan worker she is falling in love with, about it. Mari's practical activism clashes with Enric's anti-fascist resistance, aimed at recuperating Catalan culture and language repressed during the dictatorship.

Mari: Qué fácil se ven las cosas desde aquí, ¿no?

Enric: Mari, cada uno tiene su propia lucha. La mía pasa por devolver a este país su libertad, su pasado, su cultura, su lengua.

Mari: ¿Y las personas? Porque yo te estoy hablando de personas. Te hablo de Robles, de Gerardo, de Rafael. Es más importante tu puñetera lengua y el no sé qué cuanto de septiembre que las personas?

Enric: Por supuesto, Mari. Muchísimo más importante.

Mari: Esto es una barbaridad.

Enric: ¿No fuiste tú la que dijiste que las cosas tienen alma?

Mari: ¡Mira, no me lées Enric!

Enric: Mari, deberías enterarte que en este país ocurren muchas más cosas a parte las de tu barrio.

¹⁷ **Mari:** He shouldn't have got himself into troubles.

Genara: What are you talking about?

Mari: You can't resolve things protesting.

Genara: No, you can do it keeping your mouth shut, like you do! And in ten years they will earn the same miserable amount they are earning now. What happens is that people like you have this advantage, that there are others who fight for you.

Mari: For me, nobody does anything.

Genara: Maybe the man who has been arrested today was fighting so that you could have a more decent salary.

Mari: My father used to say that we have to see, listen, and keep our mouth shut.

Genara: Your father is dead and you are very well alive! And living in fear is a very bad thing.

¹⁸ "Wouldn't you be Agustina d'Aragón?". "I am Mari, the one from Huelva".



Mari: ¿Ah sí? Y que otra cosa debería saber? Hablar catalán, claro. Yo sobre todo debería saber hablar catalán, ¿verdad?

Enric: Pues sí, francamente. No sabe lo que me jode tener que hablar contigo en castellano, coño.

Mari: Mira, puede que a vosotros os hayan robado vuestra cultura y vuestra lengua. A otros además le han robado el pan. Y con el estomago vacío es muy difícil pensar en todo lo demás.

Enric: Es lo mismo, Mari. Cuando te niegan la cultura, cuando te niegan el pan es lo mismo.

Mari: Será lo mismo, pero yo me voy pa' allá. En el Verdun no somos tan listos. Muchos, como yo, cuando llegamos no sabíamos ni leer ni escribir. ¡Ni tan sensibles! Pero mira: es mi gente. ¿Y sabes lo que te digo? 'Setze jutges d'un jutjat mengen fetge d'un penjat'.

Enric: ¿Pero tú como sabes eso?

Mari: Por cojones, como todo lo demás. Adéu.¹⁹

In this dialogue two strategies of resistance collide: Mari's practical activism, aimed at increasing the level of living conditions of those around her, and Enric's wider and idealistic activism. In such difference, Emma Scaramuzza sees a "specificità

¹⁹ **Mari:** How easy things are seen from here, aren't they?

Enric: Mari, each of us has their own fight. Mine is giving back to this country its freedom, its past, its culture, its language.

Mari: And people? Because I am talking about people. I am talking about Robles, Gerardo, Rafael. Are your damn language and some anniversary or another in September more important than people? [11 September is the *Diada*, the National Day in Catalonia, *nda*]

Enric: Of course, Mari. Much more important.

Mari: This is crazy.

Enric: Weren't you the one who told me that things have a soul?

Mari: Don't play games with me, Enric!

Enric: Mari, you should understand that in this country many more things are happening a part from those which happen in your district.

Mari: Really? And what else should I know? Speaking Catalan, of course. Above all else, I should be able to speak Catalan, right?

Enric: Yes, frankly. You have no idea how much it bloody bothers me to have to talk to you in Spanish.

Mari: Listen, maybe you have been stolen your culture and your language. Others have been taken away food. And with an empty stomach, it's very difficult to think about anything else.

Enric: It's the same, Mari. When you are denied culture, when you are denied food, it's the same.

Mari: It might be the same, but I am going there. In Verdun we are not so clever. Many people, like myself, when we came here we could neither read or write. We are not so sensitive! But listen: it's my people. And you know what? 'Setze jutges d'un jutjat mengen fetge d'un penjat' [Catalan tongue-twister for children, *nda*].

Enric: How do you know that?

Mari: Life forced me to learn it, like anything else. Good bye [in Catalan].



dell'approccio femminile ai problemi sociali, un approccio che [viene] stimolato da un caso umano, personale, concreto, per poi rapportarsi a una questione sociale più ampia"²⁰ (2004: 130).

However, it is Mari who, at the end of the series asserts the importance of culture as a crucial aspect for the survival of a country.

Si entre tots aconseguim que la cultura sigui una cosa tan necessària com l'aire, haurem obert una porta que ens farà millors.²¹

At the beginning of the series, Mari is a young woman who had suffered the consequence of fascism—poverty, illiteracy, a repressive upbringing—all her life without being aware of it: "Desde chica estaba aterrorizada por la soledad, por el hambre y por el pecado",²² she confides to Iván. In her journey, helped by people she meets along the way, Mari develops a consciousness of social injustice and gender discrimination and, together with others, puts in place strategies of resistance.

Yo no había salido de mi pueblo. Era muy papa crua. Siempre tan callada y tan asustada. Lo que pasa que cuando una va a apurar, te sale a una la fuerza.²³

She says to Enric the first time they meet.

At the end of the series, she decides to become a teacher to help other people like her to have cultural tools to improve their future.

Although presenting some limitations, such as a sentimentalism and sometimes a certain degree of simplification of some issues, *La Mari* is nevertheless an attempt of a television product, aimed for a wide audience, to talk about "Aquesta gent que potser no va aconseguir acabar amb la dictadura però que oposant-s'hi, si més no, va salvar la nostra dignitat col·lectiva"²⁴ (Mayayo i Artal, 2007: 14). In particular, the miniseries recuperates the memory of women's resistance and its crucial, although very often forgotten, role in anti-francoism resistance. As Jordi Creus states,

²⁰ Specificity of a female approach to social problems, an approach which [is] stimulated by a human, personal, concrete case to then relate it to a wider social issue.

²¹ If all together we succeed in making culture as necessary as the air, we'll have opened a door that will make us better [at the end of the series, Mari expresses herself both in Catalan and in Spanish, *nda*].

²² Since I was a child, I had been terrified by loneliness, hunger and sin.

²³ I had never gone out of my town. I was so naïve. Always so silent and scared. What happens is that if you are forced to, you find your strength.

²⁴ Those people who might not have managed to put an end to the dictatorship but, fighting against it, at least saved our collective dignity.



I entre els oblidats per la inexistent reparació historica, hi destaquen les dones. Perquè la historia, aquella que el tòpic, amb encert, diu que sempre l'escriuen els vencedors, ha estat durant molt de temps només cosa d'homes.²⁵ (2007:17)

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²⁵ And among those forgotten for the non-existent historical reparation, women stand out. Because history, that the cliché rightly says is always written by the winners, has been for so long only a men's thing.