Femininity and neoliberalism in popular Spanish television series during the economic recession (2008-2015)

Feminidad y neoliberalismo en las series televisivas españolas de éxito durante la crisis económica (2008-2015)

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This article studies the models of female subjectivity in the most viewed Spanish TV series during the period of economic recession, as interpretive accounts of the ideological tensions underlying a context that rethinks the role of women. The qualitative analysis, applied to ten coprotagonists of these fictions, shows that female characters lack leadership and proactivity in the public sphere, their natural competencies are limited to resilience for adapting to the applied austerity measures, and they act as a moral contrast to the male entrepreneur as gender stereotypes are updated in the neoliberal imaginary.
KEYWORDS: TV fiction, gender, neoliberalism, recession, Spain.

Este artículo evalúa los modelos de subjetividad femenina en las series españolas más vistas en el periodo de crisis económica, como relatos interpretativos de las tensiones ideológicas subyacentes a un contexto donde se replantea el rol de la mujer. El análisis cualitativo, aplicado a diez coprotagonistas de estas ficciones, muestra personajes femeninos carentes de liderazgo y proactividad en la esfera pública, cuyas competencias naturales se circunscriben a la resiliencia para adaptarse a la austeridad sobrevenida, y que actúan como contraposición moral del emprendedor masculino, reactualizando estereotipos de género en el imaginario neoliberal.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Ficción televisiva, género, neoliberalismo, crisis, España.

Este artigo avalia os modelos de subjetividade feminina nas séries espanholas mais assistidas no período de crise econômica, como histórias interpretativas das tensões ideológicas subjacentes em um contexto em que o papel da mulher é reconsiderado. A análise qualitativa aplicada a dez co-estrelas dessas ficções mostra personagens femininas carentes de liderança e proatividade na esfera pública, cujas habilidades naturais se limitam à resiliência para se adaptar à austeridade superveniente, e que atuam como contraponto moral ao empresário masculino, atualização de estereótipos de gênero no imaginário neoliberal.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ficção televisiva, gênero, neoliberalismo, crise, Espanha.

INTRODUCTION

In Spain, during the last decade, the context of conflict arising from the socio-economic crisis has been aggravated by other ideological tensions, including those linked to gender issues. News programs have increased their focus and coverage of public demonstrations, giving greater visibility to feminist movements on important activist dates for women (March 8th, 8M, Women's Day), as well as protests against gender-based violence (#NiUnaMenos, 25N, Day against Gender Violence) and claims for the sexual indemnity for women who have suffered acts of gender violence (the case known as *La Manada* and the slogan that articulates the protest #YoSíTeCreo, similar to #MeToo) (Bernárdez Rodal & Padilla Castillo, 2019). However, as observed by Banet-Weiser et al. (2019), hypervisibility (mediated neoliberal feminism or popular feminism) does not seem to translate into statistical data showing that the discrimination and violence against women is decreasing. However, this media impact has shaken the discursive margins of feminism and also the social meaning of what is feminine (Velasco-Martínez, 2016).

To evaluate gender as a socio-political structure of power that contains the prevailing symbolic domination, it is important to observe the mechanisms for creating or subtly changing the hierarchies in the social system (Butler, 2004). As popular media texts reproduce and circulate interpretative accounts of the social conflicts and ideological tensions that underlie the societies to which they are addressed, they are an ideal place to start this analysis. Among these texts, locally produced and culturally close television fiction series have been widely studied as discursive practices that are relevant to the narrativization and interpretation of both social and individual identities (Buonanno, 1999; O'Donnell, 1999). In Spain, serial fiction has been a preferential object of study in Television Studies dedicated to exploring mechanisms of discursive construction of the nation, the rewriting of history to evaluate the present, and the representation of the *categorized other*, understood as a woman, immigrant, homosexual or adolescent (see literature review in Mateos-Pérez, 2021).

From this perspective, and in line with post-feminist criticism (Gill, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007), this article explores the discursive

formations that Spanish television fiction offers to a (still) massive audience to constitute individual subjectivities. We focus on the analysis of the gender variable to determine where the role of Spanish women has been relocated in the complex context of opposing social values that started in the largest economic crisis of the modern era.

Neoliberal subject and media narratives in times of crisis

Neoliberal rationality is a form of thought that, broadly speaking, understands individual freedom as a fundamental value, and promotes an indirect regulation of the conduct of individuals, that is, with the minimum intervention of the State (Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999). It is through self-supervision and self-scrutiny, discipline and responsibility, that the individual acquires their autonomy and self-sufficiency. Thus, a neoliberal subject who is an entrepreneur of the self becomes a *self-made man* who achieves success based on his own merits and thanks to his ambition (Rose, 1998). Meritocracy, which rewards talent when it is accompanied by effort, makes the structural causes of social inequality invisible. It is complemented by the recourse to charity, and the care of the other by personal choice, which replace the Welfare State.

Along these lines, previous studies in the English-speaking world maintain that, in times of economic crisis, the discourses of cultural productions aimed at mass consumption tend to reinforce the autonomous individualism typical of the neoliberal subject (Rose, 1999) as a basis for assigning responsibility in a hostile context (Heller, 2007). Thus, the neoliberal subject is also required to be proactive in resolving any crisis situation that arises or is caused by the incompetence or carelessness of others. The figure of the *entrepreneurial self* must be able to project leadership and charisma while adapting to an unstable context (Couldry & Littler, 2011).

Attached to this condition of resilience, which sustains the neoliberal discourse and is considered to be the ability to recover from any difficulty (Harrison, 2013), is austerity, which is regarded as a value. It is seen as a morally appropriate ethos for accepting cuts in public policies (Blyth, 2014; Ntampoudi, 2014; Peck, 2013). At a more structural level, it is interpreted as a form of moral justice for those

governments or countries that did not manage their economy well. Therefore, austerity, in its neoliberal sense, provides a framework for interpreting the measures adopted in countries such as Spain, which is more connected with the areas of family and domestic management than with the political-economic area (Bramall, 2013). Thus, the prevailing morality of saving money in the domestic sphere is advocated (Lakoff, 2007) as well as the idea of "not spending beyond your possibilities". At the same time, flexibility in the workplace is exalted, from the viewpoint that the crisis offers "an opportunity to reinvent yourself" (Borriello, 2017, p. 244).

Many of the media narratives during the last economic crisis constructed a prototypical hero associated with certain traits of the neoliberal subject: a white middle-class man, who must face a crisis situation from which he is reborn thanks to his adaptability and flexibility (Lavin & Lowe, 2015; Vanderwees, 2013). In parallel, there has also been a tendency to romanticize austerity both in post-apocalyptic narratives (Boyle & Mrozowsky, 2014) and *retreatist narratives*, where we are invited to rediscover happiness in small things, in a moral retreat into the family environment that sweetens precariousness and promotes solidarity among equals (Negra & Tasker, 2013). As women are the protagonists of these last narratives, and because they advocate the renunciation of work ambitions in favor of the home, they evidence a gender bias that has been reinforced during the crisis (Millán et al., 2015; Nieto, 2021).

Female subjectivity and television fiction in the neoliberal context
Traditionally, the social conceptualization of femininity is divided into the woman as an object of desire and the woman as a mother. On one hand, we have eroticism, sexuality, *the body as symbolic capital* for the appropriation of the "other" (male), in the terms of Bourdieu (1998); and on the other hand, motherhood as an essence and feminine ideal, *being for others*, which condemns women to postpone themselves, to servitude and submission, based on the ethics of care which are recognized in giving, protecting and reproducing life (Martínez-Herrera, 2007).

Female sexuality and traditional representation as a mother and/ or wife (caregiver) are also the two axes that articulate gender studies applied to television fiction, especially from the perspective of feminist criticism from the end of the twentieth century (Brunsdon, 2000; Buonanno, 2014). Thus, there is a clear consensus in the English-speaking world, which is corroborated for Spanish teen series (Guarinos, 2009; Lacalle, 2013; Masanet et al., 2012), that sexuality is overrepresented on television and is shown in a distorted way that promotes gender stereotypes.

Postfeminist criticism has denounced that these discursive practices associated with "new femininities" give rise to neoliberal sexual prototypes in which empowered women are associated with an uninhibited and assertive hypersexuality connected to discourses of free choice, individualism and, above all, consumerism (Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). This is corroborated by Lacalle and Castro (2017) for the female characters of Spanish fiction, who are sexualized in a proportionally inverse relationship to their age and/or beauty. These authors also point to the prevalence of contradictory or anachronistic discourses, such as those that present the loss of virginity as a symbolic triumph among young women, the assumption of exclusive responsibility by women for unwanted pregnancies, and the justification of infidelity as part of the myth of male sexuality.

The predominant archetypes in popular culture of the mother-woman allow us to determine three main contemporary typologies (Allen et al., 2015). The first corresponds to the traditional role of wife and mother, the responsible housewife as an economic saver, who is happy to contribute to the professional and personal realization of others. The second is her opposite, the mother who transgresses the traditional roles and takes advantage of the system to not fulfill her obligations (scrounger or abuser of charity). This second typology relates to the categorization of good citizens (entrepreneurs and independent) and bad citizens (unproductive and dependent on the system to survive) that some authors highlight in neoliberal discourse (Allen et al., 2015; Hamad, 2013; Jensen & Tyler, 2015).

Finally, there is the prototype of the mother of neoliberal feminism or the *superwoman*, capable of combining the facet of mother with work

success. However, unlike the second type, the *superwoman* does not provoke criticism or social rejection because she has not betrayed the feminine essence. She enjoys freedom of choice, access to both higher education and the labor market, and she has some control over her timing for maternity. However, in general in the media representations, her career is clearly defined as something that is not traditionally assigned to her. In fact, according to Negra and Tasker (2013), narratives in the recent crisis period have tended to represent female ambition as a pathological trait, which contrasts with the positive reading that is made of this constitutive aspect of the neoliberal subject in men.

In fact, this duality of the masculine and feminine is traditionally manifested in many other "social antinomies, such as private and public, moral reason and instrumental reason, protection and production, cooperation and competition" (Martínez-Herrera, 2007, p. 92). It is the binary opposition of a series of differential attributes that, within the framework of neoliberalism, has tended to reinforce female subjectivity as a lack or reversal of the masculine. Therefore, and even despite the fracture of hegemonic masculinities in post-feminist liberal environments (the *new lad*) (Gill, 2014), the feminine is still configured from the androcentric perspective of otherness, determined by what is *not* or should not be, the "no sex" of Luce Irigaray (De Miguel & Amorós, 2005).

This article studies the representations of women who were protagonists in the most successful fictional narratives in Spain during the period of the economic crisis. The aim is to observe what traits of female subjectivity are discursive, how they are interwoven with neoliberal values and how they differ from their male counterparts, who are usually closer to the figure of the entrepreneur (Gómez-Puertas et al., 2019; Oliva et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Based on the premises developed in the previous sections, we carried out a qualitative analysis of the models of female subjectivity present in the most watched fictional series of Spanish television during the period 2008-2015. This period is delimited by the emergence of

the socioeconomic crisis in Spain and by the incipient signs of recovery from this recession. These crisis years coincide with the popularization of SVOD platforms, such as Netflix, which redefined the Spanish audiovisual ecosystem. The highest Average Audience (MA) records for fiction series during these seven seasons of free linear television in Spain range from almost four to six million viewers.

From the productions with the largest audiences, we chose the season of each series with the highest audience records. Then, we selected the female characters to be analyzed based on the following criteria: a) the characters had to be protagonists or coprotagonists, that is, be part of the main cast and have an active role in the serial plots; and b) in the series with male protagonists, we chose the female characters that played the secondary role of greatest weight in all the program's seasons as a whole (Table 1). We did not include series with multiple protagonists, that is, with many interconnecting stories and characters, such as *La que se avecina*, since the seasons have different female characters alternated in coprotagonist roles according to the episodic plot. The same is true for *Aída*, especially when the character who gave the series its name disappeared.

We obtained a sample of ten characters, which is sufficiently large and representative of the female co-stars of the most watched fiction in Spain during 2008-2015. This set of television series all had very high audience records and represent the diversity of genres, themes and narratives of Spanish prime-time television (Table 2).

The methodological design is based on a qualitative analysis grid for studying popular culture texts (Casetti & Di Chio, 1999; Fiske, 1987) structured into three parts (characters, plots and fictional worlds) and applied to each of the series and the chosen characters. The characters were studied in relation to their sociodemographic, physical and psychological characteristics, motivations, competencies and actions. We also observed their self-perception and public image in the fictional world, paying special attention to how their relationship with their family and work environment was evaluated. We analyzed the plots by applying the Actantial Model of Greimas (1987) according to which we studied the different roles in detail and identified the changes of state, distinguishing the canonical phases of the story (disjunction, contract,

TABLE 1

SAMPLE ANALYSIS: SELECTED SERIES, SEASONS AND CHARACTERS

Series Title and producer	Characters selected	Broadcasting channel	Season selected	Average audience
Águila Roja (Globomedia)	Margarita and Lucrecia	La1	2010-2011	5 834 000
El Príncipe (Plano a Plano)	Fátima	Telecinco	2013-2014	5 219 000
El tiempo entre costuras (Boomerang TV)	Sira	Antena 3	2013-2014	4 905 000
Cuéntame cómo pasó (Ganga)	Mercedes	La1	2010-2011	4 724 000
Allí abajo (Plano a Plano)	Carmen	Antena 3	2014-2015	4 524 000
Chiringuito de Pepe (100 balas)	Mati	Telecinco	2013-2014	4 343 000
Aída (Globomedia)	Aída*	Telecinco	2008-2009	4 263 000
Velvet (Bambú Producciones)	Ana	Antena 3	2013-2014	4 262 000
LQSA (Contubernio)	Coral protagonism*	Telecinco	2012-2013	4 140 000
El Barco (Globomedia)	Ainhoa	Antena 3	2010-2011	4 132 000

Source: The authors based on information from GECA (Kantar Media data).

TABLE 2

INFORMATION ON THE ANALYZED SERIES

Águila Roja (2009-2016). Dramedy. Adventure and action. Total: 9 seasons, 116 episodes (90 min.)

Set in an imaginary village in the area of Madrid in the 16th century, it relates the adventures of Gonzalo de Montalvo (alias "Red Eagle"), a teacher and vigilante, widower and father. The female characters that accompany him are Margarita, his sister-in-law, and the Marquise Lucrecia de Guzmán, also in love with him.

Aída (2005-2014). Comedy. Total: 10 seasons, 238 episodes (45 min.)

This series narrates the life of Aída, a divorced mother who works cleaning houses to get by. When her father dies, she moves with her family to the outskirts of the capital, Esperanza Sur, where she grew up.

Allí abajo (2015-2019). Comedy. Total: 5 seasons with 69 episodes (60-75 min.)

A series that highlights the cultural contrast between people from the Basque Country and Andalusia. It relates the relationship between Iñaki, a Basque innkeeper who is forced to live in Andalusia, and Carmen, a nurse from Seville.

Chiringuito de Pepe (2014-2016). Comedy. Total: 2 seasons, 26 episodes (75-90 min.)

Sergi Roca, a renowned chef, begins to work in the fry-up kitchen of a beach bar to save the business of his long-lost father. Mati, his most efficient employee, helps him.

Cuéntame cómo pasó (2001-). Drama. Total: 22 seasons (open), 407 episodes (75 min.)

The Spanish democratic transition (1978-1979) is told through the experiences of the Alcántara family. The patriarch, Antonio, moves up in his political career and the family moves to the Madrid neighborhood of Salamanca, where Mercedes, his wife, must mediate the process of adaptation.

El Barco (2011-2013). Drama. Adventure and mystery. Total: 3 seasons, 44 episodes (75 min.)

A young-adult series set in a dystopian present. An accident with the particle accelerator leaves the crew of the school ship Polar Star without communications, isolated at sea. The ship's captain, his daughter Ainhoa and a young stowaway, Ulises, are the protagonists.

El Príncipe (2014-2016). Drama. Police drama, action, adventure. Total: 2 seasons, 31 episodes (75 min.)

The main plot revolves around the anti-terrorist struggle in the neighborhood of Ceuta, after the arrival of Spanish National Intelligence agent Morey, who infiltrated the police station commanded by the veteran Fran. Fátima, a Muslim, sister of the missing young man with whom the story starts, leads the romantic plot.

El tiempo entre costuras (2013-2014). Drama. History, adventure. Total: 1 season, 11 episodes (75 min.)

Based on the novel of the same name by María Dueñas, set between Madrid and Tétouan in the 30s and 40s, it tells the story of Sira Quiroga, a seamstress who is recruited as a spy by the English government after having overcome the upheaval of the Spanish Civil War.

Velvet (2013-2016). Drama. Romance. Total: 4 seasons, 55 episodes (75 min.)

Set in Madrid in the late 1950s. It follows the love story of Alberto, owner of some fashion galleries that he saves with a marriage of convenience, and Ana, a seamstress who dreams of becoming a couturier.

Source: The authors based on information from GECA (Kantar Media data) and the IMDb database.

competence, performance and sanction) and the sphere of action of the chosen characters, their relationship with legal and moral norms, and the freedom of decision to act. We also analyzed the temporal space context and the characteristics of the fictional world (natural and sociocultural dimension; athletic, deontic, epistemic and axiological traits) in which the series takes place following Dolezel's approach (1999).

This analysis grid, in its three dimensions, allows us to observe the conflicts posed by the texts and the prevailing attitudes of the female characters co/protagonists throughout a season, as well as determine how they are sanctioned both by the text and by the rest of the characters.

RESULTS

The analysis of these female characters co-starring in the most popular series in Spain during the crisis shows how these roles connect with some of the values and traits of the ideal of a neoliberal subject. However, none of them fully embodies this ideal, not even when they play the leading role as heroines.

Entrepreneurs with limits: prevailing female guilt and sacrifice

Sira, the protagonist of *El tiempo entre costuras*, is the profile closest to the neoliberal subject, as she is a clear example of a "self-made woman": she manages to create her own sewing business, overcoming an adverse situation and, with much effort and dedication, she is able to move up the social ladder. She is, therefore, a resilient entrepreneur, who deserves to succeed both for her talent and for her ability to work tirelessly. The limits to this prototype are set by her status as a woman, which distinguishes her in her attitudes and motivations to act. On one hand, in the character of Sira there is a contradiction between the work world and the domestic world that rarely appears in the media constructions of the neoliberal subject: although her priority (endorsed by the text) is her work, she feels guilty for not being able to look after her parents. This feeling of guilt, motivated by the sacrifice of a care task that she considers her own, as well as her psychological

traits of solidarity and generosity with her peers, distance her from the competitive and aggressive ideal of the neoliberal subject. On the other hand, in her later role of spy, as she is the dressmaker of the wives of military and political leaders, the missions are entrusted to her by appealing to her instinct for protecting others and her sense of justice. And here, her innate talents (appearance, intelligence and discretion) allow her to perform in private territory better than any male hero could do. Again, the sacrifice for the good of the community is feminine, something that is repeated in the other characters analyzed here.

It should be noted that, as also happens for the character of Ana Ribera, in *Velvet*, this "natural know-how" in higher social situations of protagonists of humble origin, relativizes the structural inequality of the social context of stories set in the first half of the twentieth century.

Women's happiness is not in their work performance

As noted above, difficulties in reconciling family and professional life are also often made invisible, either because they are not problematized or because women who succeed in the workplace do not have family responsibilities. This is the case of Mati in *Chiringuito de Pepe*, a character who is dedicated to her work as a sous chef, and who brings together key characteristics of the neoliberal subject. On one hand, we have her passion for cooking and her eagerness to prove her worth to be able to move up professionally. On the other hand, is her capacity for reinvention and adaptation, by quickly getting used to working in precarious working conditions, seeing them as an opportunity for improvement.

But again, these traits are nuanced by others that have been traditionally used to describe what is feminine, such as empathy and her preference for cooperating rather than competing. It is precisely this gentle, kind character and the sensitivity with which she connects with the bleak, if not tasteless and kitsch environment of the beach bar where she works, that highlight the contrast with the male protagonist, the chef Sergi Roca. He embodies the prototype of a successful entrepreneur, ambitious and disciplined, able to develop and evolve in the competitive environment of haute cuisine, but unable to adapt to the fry-up breach bar.

In assigning the role of mediator between the two realities to Mati, not only does the series restore a classic role attributed to women, but it also underlines the weakness of the male protagonist as an entrepreneur, which is often seen in other characters of Spanish fiction, such as Antonio Alcántara in *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (Gómez-Puertas et al., 2019). She, on the other hand, embodies resilience and the ability to adapt to hostile environments, as well as the morally appropriate ethos for accepting restrictions, which is austerity in the neoliberal sense. Women, therefore, are necessary to recover the sense of justice imposed by lack and saving money is used as a corrective behavior.

The paradox is that these traits of resilience and austerity, key characteristics of the neoliberal subject, with which Mati balances the deficits of the entrepreneurial chef, do not make her worthy of recognition in the form of a job promotion. Although she puts her work before any project of becoming a woman-mother, and even the re-appropriation of her body and sexuality, her actual reward is to become someone who is desirable for the protagonist. Thus, the text validates the idea that women are incomplete when they renounce love and family, even if they do so voluntarily and consciously. The job is not enough.

This idea prevails in most of the characters analyzed, for which professional life is not a priority and/or can be subordinated to love and emotional interests. Thus, Carmen (*Allí abajo*) is another of the few characters who, in a contemporary space-time context, is presented as an autonomous, independent woman, without a dependent family and professionally active. Carmen responds to the prototype of a woman in a qualified profession within the ethics of care: she is a responsible, competent, disciplined and willing nurse, who, however, lacks the ambition and competitive spirit that the neoliberal profile advocates. During the season analyzed, Carmen's character is also developed in the sentimental plot, in which she contrasts with the rough Iñaki, who is incompetent in the art of seduction and the management of his emotions.

Beyond the similarities with the character of Mati, we see again how the vulnerability associated with the female profile is accentuated in the romantic plane, where an ideal of the mother/wife who is easy to seduce or deceive with promises of love is projected. Clear examples of

this are that Carmen lives humiliated by agreeing to hide her relationship with a hospital doctor who is unwilling to commit, just as Sira is abandoned in Tétouan by the fiancé who steals her inheritance. These characters move away from the model of post-feminist femininity since their empowerment is pure appearance as they long for love as a form of full realization.

Women as the moral counterpoint of the entrepreneurial man

The cases of *Cuéntame cómo pasó* and *Velvet* illustrate how the female characters make it possible for the male hero protagonist to develop completely as an entrepreneurial subject by being his moral counterweight. It is interesting, first of all, that the character of Mercedes Alcántara is the one that brings together some of the elements that can be linked with neoliberal feminism or post-feminism. Thus, she is a woman who combines paid work, studies and domestic work without apparent contradiction or tension arising from this. The conciliation between the family and her professional work is sometimes difficult; however, it is not posed as a structural problem, but rather as Mercedes' individual responsibility. Moreover, it is always resolved in the same way: by prioritizing the domestic sphere, which is constructed in the fictional world as her natural space, as opposed to the professional world and that of her studies, which are seen as complementary and, therefore, if necessary, expendable. In this sense, she does not completely fit the ideal of a *superwoman* capable of combining work success with family harmony, as it is demonstrated that it is not always possible to achieve both.

In any case, Mercedes is a character with a great capacity for work, sacrifice and self-restraint, and she is also pragmatic and resilient, all of which are characteristics of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject. However, what distinguishes her and allows her to act as a counterweight to Antonio, her entrepreneurial husband, is her connection to the ideal of austerity that neoliberal discourse emphasizes: she rejects luxury and persists in the need to control spending. Antonio is ambitious, competitive, impulsive, wasteful and prioritizes his professional career, but Mercedes is humble, careful with money, rational and keeps the family as her central concern. Not only does the care and emotional

support that Mercedes give to Antonio allow him to make a turn in his professional life, but also her empathy, honesty and rectitude are key to his social integration when he moves up. Similarly, when they are in an adverse context, when Antonio is ruined and forced to abandon his political career, it is Mercedes who puts into practice her resilience to be able to start again.

In general, Mercedes has higher morals than her husband. It could be said that this softens the figure of the entrepreneur represented by Antonio. A combination of values that are not typical of the neoliberal subject but which are socially appreciated, especially in societies with a Catholic cultural background (honesty, humility, warmth, putting the well-being of others above one's own), are added to others that are much more typical of this ideal, but which Antonio, however, lacks (rationality, austerity, resilience).

Similarly, for Ana from *Velvet*, despite her talent and passion for her work, we again find the sacrifice of her own professional promotion for the common good. Ana participates in Alberto's work project to protect the jobs of the colleagues with whom she is always cooperative. In this way, and despite sharing with the young male entrepreneur the ability to work hard, as well as his dedication to the fashion galleries, the female character, is again constituted as a counterpoint. However, unlike Sira or Mercedes, Ana embodies the classic model of femininity, as she is a beautiful and docile woman. The moral value of sacrifice is to the detriment of both her work aspirations (because she does aspire to become a couturier) and her ideal of happiness, that of a self-sacrificing mother and wife. Consequently, she is a rather conformist character, comfortable in subordinate roles, which are characteristics clearly foreign to those of the neoliberal subject.

Resigned, powerless young women in the crisis epic

This profile of resigned woman connects with that of Ainhoa (*El Barco*) and Fátima (*El Príncipe*) the two youngest female co-starring characters of the series analyzed. They also have a role in the sentimental storylines, remaining outside or not always aware of their participation in the plots of action and intrigue that occur in the dystopian fictional worlds that they inhabit. Therefore, both characters see their sphere of

action limited to the family and to service to the community as they also take on roles typical of the ethics of care: teacher, older sister, assistant and again spy in the more epic facet of the story. Although they show a natural predisposition for these tasks, as they are sensitive and selfless in fulfilling the needs of their loved ones, they do not manage to do these care tasks to the satisfaction they would like, since the magnitude of the problem they perceive seems to be so much bigger than them.

Thus, Ainhoa experiences constant swings between power struggles and conflicts of interest between characters, mostly male, in an uncertain context in which there is no place to constitute herself as a hero beyond the role of protection of her sister and, partly, of her companions, for whom she feels responsible as the daughter of the captain of the ship. For her part, Fátima adds her initial bitterness over the future of the neighborhood's youth, between drugs and crime, to the deep disappointment of discovering that her brother, whom she believed to be an applied student, has been taken in by a terrorist group. Contrary to Fátima's projection of the boy as the ideal of the hope provided by hard work and education for young Muslims in slums, Islamist terror is presented as a socio-structural conflict that Fátima cannot and does not know how to combat. Just as she lived outside this reality, she also does so with respect to the intentions of the policeman, Morey, who manipulates her by seducing her for professional purposes, and to her fiancé, radicalized leader of the terrorist plot. Fátima undertakes missions under the command of each of these men, and after each betrayal, she returns to her starting point: selfless daughter, sister, beautiful traditional wife, with a philanthropic job in the civic center whenever her family duties allow her to do it. Ainhoa and Fátima are both secondary characters, rarely active on their own initiative and never for their own benefit, beyond the love goals that culminate in sexual surrender, and which are far from breaking with the myth of romantic love. Both move in the field of the private, the protection of those close to them and the will to cooperate. They do not have a proactive attitude, they are not autonomous and do not show leadership in a hostile context, which they leave in the hands of the male heroes. Their sensitivity and candor, coupled with their beauty and attractive youth, make them more like resources or objects of desire than empowered subjects.

Possible transgressions: the post-feminist model
seen from criticism and humor

Finally, Lucrecia stands out here (despite the context of the sixteenth century, which is totally disparate to the neoliberal ideology, in which *Águila Roja* is set) as a female character who resists the submissive role of woman/mother and claims her autonomy from hypersexuality. She belongs to the aristocratic class, from where she struggles to maintain control of her life, her possessions and, above all, the future of her son. The ambivalent maternal-filial relationship that is constructed illustrates the character of Lucrecia well. She uses coldness as a protective shield against a sensitivity that makes her vulnerable. Her son gives her position as mother of the heir, but he is also the one that has to protect her in an environment of exclusively male power. Lucrecia is torn between her hedonistic behavior of sexual disinhibition and reclaiming her body, and the constant humiliation she suffers for being a woman.

Thus, far from ascribing her hypersexuality to the empowerment of post-feminism, she is taken to the pathological level. Her achievements translate into a negative characterization, which shows her as an evil person to be pitied rather than hated, for not being able to find her natural place as a woman. This place is dedicated in the series to the character of Margarita, redeemed in her kindness and deserving of the attention of Gonzalo de Montalvo, alias *Águila Roja*, a complex character who embodies values typical of the traditional epic hero, and who in the private sphere corresponds to the single-parent model inaugurated in the Spanish tradition by *Médico de familia* (Globomedia, 1995).

In this attempt to transgress the classic model of femininity, we also find the character of Aída, along with some of the characters that make up the multiple protagonist series not included here, such as *La que se avecina*. Aída constantly exhibits her greed for sexual satisfaction or uses seduction as a resource for gaining material benefits. This discourse, however, is always constructed from ironic humor and attributed to her being from the lower classes. This pattern is repeated to construct the bad citizen model when she seeks to take advantage of the system, connecting this type of wife/mother with the classic Spanish picaresque narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the protagonists and coprotagonists of the successful series on generalist broadcast television in Spain during the period 2008-2015 shows that these characters are constructed as figures of opposition to social values typical of neoliberal thought. They are denied an attitude of leadership and proactivity, especially in the public sphere. Their natural competencies are limited to resilience and the ability to adapt to the contexts of austerity that have arisen. Spanish television narratives, therefore, do not promote alternative patterns of action, and persistently link the feminine to the traditional values of loyalty to the family and the ideal of fulfillment in love. The female characters are endowed with characteristics denied to the male characters, such as empathy and altruism. Thus, they become counterweights to the emotional deficiencies (not priorities) of the entrepreneurial subject (male, by default), or they become the moral counterpoint that corrects an individual's ambition that is represented as excessive.

In accordance with previous studies, it is the younger characters who embody the female subject as an object of desire, far removed from post-feminist empowerment as the myth of romantic love prevails. Moreover, the Spanish series analyzed do not represent uninhibited female hypersexuality in a positive way, but rather only occasionally and as a pathological or marginal trait. Unlike the most celebrated Anglo-Saxon post-feminist fictions, in Spanish television fiction, as already pointed out by Lacalle and Gómez (2016b) and Menéndez (2014), there is no prominent place for empowered women. During this crisis period, therefore, gender stereotypes have been perpetuated and updated in the neoliberal imagery of popular media texts.

Despite this, dedication to work is valued positively. Therefore, it cannot be stated emphatically, as other authors have done in the previous literature dedicated to Spanish television fiction (Galán, 2007; García-Muñoz et al., 2012; González-de-Garay et al., 2019; Lacalle & Gómez, 2016a, 2016b; Ortega & Simelio, 2013), that women are penalized for prioritizing their professional development in the public sphere. In any case, the difficulties of conciliation between family and work are made invisible or it is assumed that, based on the myth that

women have free choice, professional success implies the sacrifice of family and/or sentimental life (Lacalle & Hidalgo-Marí, 2016). In addition, the female characters' professions are limited to the range of care tasks or jobs traditionally performed by women in the domestic sphere (seamstresses, nurses, cooks), when they are not subject to male leadership (entrepreneur, agent, doctor or chef), as Lacalle and Gómez (2016b) also point out in their research. The transversal discourse is that women have to choose between family and work, showing on most occasions that the first is their natural place. Therefore, prioritizing work, whether or not women accept it, has emotional costs that men do not experience. In this sense, the ideal here is Mercedes (*Cuéntame cómo pasó*), who, by prioritizing family harmony as a desirable goal (Lacalle & Castro, 2017), makes it possible for the entrepreneurial subject, her husband, to fulfil his plans and provides him with an essential counterpoint before the advent of the crisis.

Austerity, so necessary, is attached to the home as a moral refuge guarded by the good and self-sacrificing women/mothers. In the most popular series, the *superwoman* or the woman who abuses the system is unacceptable. The role in which the imaginary of television fiction places contemporary Spanish women is that of the heroine of everyday life, who safeguards the home and is a responsible worker, and who must stick to a limited range of action. Thus, the celebrated resilient attitude of the adult coprotagonists contrasts with the apathetic resignation of the younger ones, when they realize the impossibility of bringing about changes that have a greater social reach.

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