

**Women and Society in Emilia de Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa*
and José María de Pereda's *La Montálvez***

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*After the 1868 Revolution, the question of the social situation of women became highly topical in Spain and had considerable impact on the literature of that period. It was reflected with special intensity in Spanish Naturalism, which associated it directly with the social environment, nature and education. In fact, the social situation of women was one of the main topics of Spanish Naturalist works, as in Emilia de Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* and in Jose María de Pereda's *La Montálvez*. The purpose of this article is to consider how women's issues are represented in these two novels as well as to analyze how the authors' social prejudices are reflected through the "objectivity" of the narrator that permeates their works. The article examines the construction of female characters both in *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *La Montálvez* and their treatment in the novels according to the social class to which they belong. There are some common features, but also certain differences between the female characters of Pereda and Pardo Bazan. Thus, although their female protagonists are quite well developed in terms of physical and psychological description, their development is more substantial in *Los pazos de Ulloa*. By contrast, the secondary characters are constructed with greater detail in *La Montálvez*. The harmful influence of the environment on women is a basic feature of the female characters in both novels, and is the source of their death and moral degeneracy. Moreover, the social repression of women and their total dependence on men are constants of *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *La Montálvez*. Nevertheless, the representation of female characters according to their social position varies greatly from Pardo Bazán to Pereda. On the one hand, in *Los pazos de Ulloa* provincial upper class and bourgeois women are positively described and their defects are very leniently judged, while Galician peasants represent the worst of social vices. On the other hand, in *La Montálvez* decency, religious values and purity of feelings are present in low and middle class women, while immorality and vice are concentrated in the description of their aristocratic counterparts.*

Naturalism, one of the most important intellectual and artistic movements of the nineteenth-century, arrived in Spain in the 1870s. However, the cultural, socio-economic and political environment in which Naturalism emerged in Spain was radically different than its original birthplace in France.¹ For example, in *La*

¹ Naturalism attempts to use objectivity and scientific methodology in the study of human beings, assuming that their fates were determined by heredity and environment. While a number of factors influenced the development of this approach, Naturalists drew heavily

cuestión palpitante (*The Burning Question*, 1883) Emilia del Pardo Bazán examined the theses of Zola's 'method,' and the publication of her book provoked a tremendous scandal. The conservative, Catholic, Spanish society did not easily tolerate the new French movement, which was labelled 'obscene', 'scandalous' and 'unmoral.' Nevertheless, although Naturalism's arrival produced long debates and polemics, it was assimilated into Spanish literature and adapted to the Spanish public.²

The existence of differences between French Naturalism and Spanish Naturalism, also called "spiritual naturalism" (Caudet 45) has been widely accepted by the critics.³ For example, Ciriaco Morrón Arroyo emphasized the importance of the roots of Spanish classic realism, *La Celestina*, the picaresque novel, and *El Quijote* in the development of Spanish Naturalism (974). Also, he explained the differences as arising from the influence of criminological Italian anthropology, such as Lombroso, in Spanish intellectual circles (1995: 974).

Despite repeatedly negating their affiliation to the School of Naturalism, many Spanish writers incorporated naturalistic features into their creations. Such is the case of Emilia Pardo Bazán in her novel *Los pazos de Ulloa* (1886) and Jose María de Pereda in *La Montálvez* (1888). *Los pazos de Ulloa* has been denominated as "Catholic naturalism" (Brown 43). According to Maryellen Bieder (131), Pardo Bazán

forges her novel from the conjunction of *costumbrista* set pieces, realistic portrayal and plotting, sentimental exaltation of motherhood, and naturalist observation of man and nature. Fashioning her response to the claims of competing genre traditions, she builds a synthesis of referential representation (realism), detached observation (naturalism), and moral suasion (sentimental novel).

Similarly, while critics have called Pereda's *La Montálvez* "tendentious novel with naturalistic elements" (González Herrán 287). To date, this novel has not yet been considered a real naturalistic novel for primarily two reasons. First of all, in spite of following the principles of the French School, Pereda has a moralizing finality in his work, which is not considered a characteristic of Naturalism. Second, the scientific objectivity required of Naturalism often disappears behind the narrator's opinions and judgements, which are a faithful reflection of Pereda's conservative traditionalism. However, both Pereda's *La Montálvez* and Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* are believed to be Naturalistic novels because of the characterization, context, and the representation of the dark side of society.

upon Claude Bernard's medical positivism, Darwin's evolutionary model and Taine's historical conceptions, among others. This approach is most centrally identified with the work of Émile Zola, who first used the method in his *Thérèse Raquin* (1868).

²One characteristic of Naturalism is that heredity and social environment determine an individual's personality. Determinism is contrary to the Christian conception of 'repented sinner,' who can reach salvation through penitence and life transformation. In Spanish Naturalism, heredity and social environment do not completely determine the character and the union of these elements with education only partially establishes the personality and actions of characters.

³See, for example, Bonet (1988); Etreros (1977); Meyer-Minnemam (1991); Tasende-Grabowski (1991); and Francisco Caudet (1995).

Without stopping to discuss Naturalism in *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *La Montálvez*, both of which I consider naturalist, I am going to focus on how the feminine situation is presented in these works. Also I will concentrate on the authors' social prejudices and how they are reflected in their novels through the permeable 'objectivity' of the narrators and in the treatment of feminine characters.⁴

Naturalistic novels constantly reflect the difficult social situations of women, including their defencelessness in a society which demands from them virtue, sacrifices, ignorance and an absolute dependence on a masculine figure. As these issues receive such a high level of attention in Spanish naturalistic novels, it can be asserted that the situation of women is one of the main topics in Spanish Naturalism. Examples can be found in Benito Pérez Galdós' *La Desheredada* and *Fortunata y Jacinta*, Armando Palacio Valdés's *La espuma*, Emilia Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *La madre naturaleza*, Jose María de Pereda's *La Montálvez* and *Sotileza*, Leopoldo Alas Clarín's *La Regenta*. In their novels these authors disclosed the terrible vulnerability of women in a society that limited them in almost all aspects of life. However, did the authors believe that the situation of Spanish women had to change?

In Spain near the end of the nineteenth-century, the precarious situation of women attracted a lot of attention because of such enterprising women as Concha Espina and Emilia Pardo Bazán. They denounced both the lack of real education for women, and the existing duality of conduct prescribed for men and women, combining to prevent women from developing intellectually or gaining even a minimal independence from their male relatives. Emilia Pardo Bazán, in her compilation of articles about Spanish woman, called *La mujer española y otros artículos [Spanish women and other articles]* repeatedly pointed out that the lack of education in women, imposed by men and society in general, contradicted the basic principles of intellectual growth. As she stated: "Clearly and simply speaking, what adds honour and glory to men, is for women dishonour of monstrous proportions" (77). According to Pardo Bazán, this educational deficiency could be found in all Spanish social classes, mainly in the people and the bourgeoisie, but also in the aristocracy, as aristocratic women received a banal and insufficient education. In her articles, she strongly criticized the aims of feminine education: obedience, submissiveness, resignation and sacrifice.

The problem of feminine education is one of the main themes in Pereda's *La Montálvez*. Parents are unable to educate their daughters. The mother is the least able to educate her daughters, as she cannot offer her daughters a role model for "a decent and devout life." So, the mother Verónica Montálvez, with the support of the narrator, rejected the French education she received in France as an acceptable model for her daughter Luz. Instead, she based Luz's ideal education on "a little bit of grammar and a lot of good learned religion." Indeed, this suggested method for developing purity and decency in women exemplifies the insufficient education that Pardo Bazán criticized in her articles about the education of women being a defence of ignorance, submissiveness, and religious devotion. (Pardo Bazán 28).

⁴ However, permeable objectivity is more clearly exposed in *La Montalvez* than in *Los pazos de Ulloa*.

In *La Montálvez*, Veronica's manifestations of education correspond to the traditional and conservative ideas of the author. In an apology about the morality of his work, *La Montalvez*, Pereda expressed his opinion about the reading of the novel by 'señoritas' in these terms.:

Very young ladies, who we usually call "our daughters" must not read any novels, neither good nor bad ones, because the best of the novels will be boring for them or it will teach them something that will arise their desires for things more dangerous (Cited by Madariaga de la Campa 318).

The countess Pardo Bazán has been traditionally considered as a pioneer of Spanish Feminism (Fox-Lokert, 50). Indeed, in her articles, letters and public speeches she stressed that the only alternatives for Spanish women were "marriage, a religious vocation, prostitution or abject poverty" (Fox-Lockert, 52). She affirmed,

I am a radical feminist. I believe that every privilege a man has should also be for the woman ... It is in underdeveloped countries that the woman is considered a beast of burden and a sex object. Spanish men make a great pretence of always being preoccupied with the love of women and there can be no greater obstacle than this for the advancement of women. It perpetuates the battle between the sexes which has existed since primitive times (Cited by Fox-Lockert, 52).

In other words, in the nineteenth-century patriarchal society men prevented the intellectual advancement of women with their overprotection and gender rigid structure.

In spite of her articles, Pardo Bazán did not pay attention to the question of feminine education in her novels. The bravery that she demonstrated in her articles, short stories, and also, in her personal life, is absent in her novels, where the defended model of womanhood is characterized by passivity, submission and obedience to the father or husband. Thus, in *Los pazos de Ulloa*, the only positive heroine is Nucha, model of Catholic woman: religious, responsible, submissive, resigned, virginal and pure. Janet Perez has suggested that there is evidence of a subtext for feminism in *Los pazos de Ulloa*, if taking into consideration that none of the masculine characters are notable for their values (154). I assert, then, that the same applies to female characters. In *Los pazos de Ulloa* the female exemplifies the stereotypical submissive woman. In Pardo Bazán's novel, women adjust to the typical and "expected" model of life and to the values imposed by society. Neither Nucha nor her sisters have received more education than is necessary to be "good mothers and spouses". Only the brother, Gabriel, has the privilege of studying in Madrid.

The development of main characters is particularly rich in Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa*. They acquire deep and elaborated physical and psychological dimensions through expressive dialogs, descriptions and narratives given from diverse narrative voices, such as the narrator and other characters. With the help of these devices, the reader witnesses the physical and psychological changes in Nucha, always observed through the eyes of Julián, her husband Don Pedro, or the narrator. The reader becomes aware that the weak state she is in her husband's house, her progressive depression and nervous crisis

is a result of her submissiveness, firstly to her father, and later, to her husband. Secondary characters are also represented through the judgment of other characters – mainly male characters – such as Julián, or mediated by the narrator in *Los pazos de Ulloa*. The author, Pardo Bazán, does not establish a psychological portrait of them, only a few features that mark their actions. This is the case of Sabel, Don Pedro's mistress. Her own thoughts or feelings are not revealed to the reader, and she is closer to a puppet than a representation of a human being. Indeed, in *Los pazos de Ulloa* feminine voices are drowned by a traditional masculine narrator and by the masculine characters. Bieder has remarked on the masculine focalization of female characters in Pardo Bazán's novel. (142). Women occupy a secondary level. They are silenced and depend on male characters for their existence in the novel's fictional world. Thus, in *Los pazos de Ulloa*, the silence that affects women can be seen as a concealed rejection of literary and social patriarchy that avoid women of exercising any right or realization as human beings. She does it from within the patriarchal literary forms. As with Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* or Emily Brönte in *Wuthering Heights*, the economic dependence, the lack of education, and the imposition of social values make it impossible for middle class and lower class women to improve their situations. They do not find any real support around them and even those that love them collaborate in their oppression and, finally, in their death.

In Pereda's *La Montalvez*, "novela de tesis" according to Galdós, the feminine dependence on men is also noticeable, but with some variations. Here, aristocrats hide behind their arranged marriages and live a dissolute life while keeping up appearances. Married women acquired a freedom that they had not enjoyed while they were single, with multiples lovers and affairs. However, in such a "degenerated society," women still have to depend on their fathers or their husbands. Needless to say, there is a double standard for criticizing adulterous wives and forgiving lovers and husbands.

The determinism of social environment over feminine characters is emphasized in *La Montalvez*. Nica Montalvez has to overcome the vicious circle of the society she belongs to and its determinism. Although a victim of society, she is seen as a sinner, and in spite of her remorse, she is punished with her daughter's death. The autobiographical notes of Nica Montalvez, transcribed and commented by the narrator, have a moralizing finality in Pereda's *La Montalvez*: "I offer the scandals of my life to the abomination of all honest women" (557). Treatment given to feminine figures according to their social position varies completely from Pardo Bazán to Pereda. Depending on their social position, women are treated in a different way, which is an aspect of a "classist" attitude. In *Los pazos de Ulloa* the provincial upper class is described in a positive manner, treating their defects with clear benevolence. This is the case of Nucha's family, the thrifty mother of Don Pedro or the mummified ladies Limioso. In contrast, middle classes are presented with mockery, showing up their narrowness and insignificance. For instance, the Judge's wife is mocked for her small-town style trying to imitate the capital city style.

Nevertheless, it is the Galician peasants who represent in Pardo Bazán's novel the worst defects of society. They lack honesty and are depicted as promiscuous, dirty, egoistic, crafty and obstinately ignorant. Peasant women, treated more as a collective character than individuals, with a few exceptions

such as Sabel and La Sabia, are illiterate and superstitious. In other words, peasants are the opposite of scientific progress and evolution. Thus, Nucha's wet nurse is "a human cow" (275), Sabel "a harmful and shameless animal...a bad female no more decent than the cows" (106), la Sabia, "an horrible sibyl... looks like a witch in witches' Sabbath" (301).

According to Carlos Feal Deibe, *Los pazos de Ulloa* is "a microcosm of polyphony, with all its social and ideological voices" (216). However, not all voices are present in *Los pazos de Ulloa*. The voice than can be heard over others is one sympathizing with the aristocracy and with contemptuous treatment of peasants. The omission of the peasants' voice is manifest in the whole novel, as they are seen through the eyes of other personages. Readers know what other characters think about peasants, but not what individuals of this social class think for her or himself. Generally, peasants are represented as a collective character: women in the kitchen, in dances, in collective works. The voices of the most individual of them, Sabel, Filomena and the wet nurse are silenced.

The personage of Sabel presents certain parallelism with Nucha. Both of them are obliged to 'belong' to Don Pedro. They do not belong to him voluntary, but are forced upon him by their fathers. However, the treatment that each receives in *Los pazos de Ulloa* is very different because of their social position. Nucha's circumstances dictate that she is obedient to her father's desires. This justifies Nucha's marriage without love to her cousin Don Pedro. Her sacrifice is typical in women's fate of her times: she is one victim of society.

Sabel is also victimized because of her father's desires. She becomes Don Pedro's mistress and is cruelly criticized for her actions, unlike Nucha. As a peasant of an almost feudal Galicia, Sabel does not have any choice to make: she simply is at her lord's disposal. Primitivo, Sabel's greedy father, uses his daughter's body to take power over Don Pedro and Don Pedro's wealth. Therefore, Sabel is literally forced by her father Primitivo to become sexually involved with Don Pedro and tolerate his lover's violence and domination. Far from being an "ever-pleasing mistress," Sabel often tries to avoid Don Pedro, who has to "hunt her as a hare." Once she makes an attempt to leave Don Pedro and she is brutally beaten by her lover. Nevertheless, in the novel Sabel is blamed for destroying Don Pedro's future with such "illicit relations" as the narrator supports Don Pedro against the "evil" Sabel, who is the embodiment of "vicious nature." Even her acts of rebellion against Don Pedro, such as flirting with young men in her social class or feeding the peasants at the expense of her hated lord, are criticized in the novel. Observed through the eyes of middle and upper-middle class characters – mainly males – Sabel represents the "shameless and ignorant" female peasant.

This classist treatment of women in some social classes and the defence of her own social group, aristocracy, can also be found in Pardo Bazán's articles *La mujer española y otros artículos feministas (Spanish Women and other Articles)*. There, in her description of women according to their social class, the countess Pardo Bazán excuses and sings the praises of aristocrats, attacks mercilessly middle classes and describes humorously, using "costumbrist" techniques, working-class and rural women. (1976: 25-70).

Also, Pereda represents women of different social classes in his novel, praising those who belong to the author's own social class, the bourgeoisie. He denounces the "vices and degeneration" of aristocrats from Madrid, especially

aristocratic women, considered as the incarnation of the sinners, immorality and vicious nature. In contrast, decency, religious values and pure feelings are qualities esteemed in middle class women. This middle class is represented in Pereda's *La Montalvez* by the Nuñez, the family of the unemployed judge. Veronica, belonging to aristocrat classes, is influenced by the social environment and shares the qualities of her social class, although by her "natural" personality she seems to be closer to middle classes. This characterization explains why Veronica Montalvez is so interested in educating her daughter Luz in a convent, where the superficiality and corruption of the upper class cannot spoil her. Veronica is convinced that only the religious middle class has preserved the essential values for a woman: purity, decency and humbleness. However, the common people are not presented in *La Montalvez*. Remaining in complete anonymity, female servants and other characters of lower classes are shadows in Pereda's novel.

In Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* and Pereda's *La Montalvez* the representation of the Spanish woman in the fictional world of feminine characters and their social situation are not established as objectively as expected in Naturalistic novels. In *La Montalvez* the perception of the narrator seems to be dominated by the author's position, who imposes his own system of values, his social prejudices and his position about social repression of women through the narrator/transcriber of Veronica's diary. More complicated is the situation of Pardo Bazán's narration. In *Los pazos de Ulloa* as in her other novels (such as *La madre naturaleza*), the countess Pardo Bazán maintains the traditional masculine narrative, hiding her own progressive ideas behind the masculine perspective of narrator and masculine characters. In my opinion, in writing from the traditional masculine perspective she tried to avoid having her works considered 'feminine literature'.⁵ Thus, writing from a masculine point of view she was able to attain a position of higher worth, and secure a place among the most important Spanish masculine writers of the nineteenth-century.

In short, José María de Pereda's *La Montalvez* and Emilia del Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* illustrate particularly well that the debate about the situation of Spanish women which arises during the last decades of the nineteenth-century is one of the main topics in Spanish naturalistic novels. Pereda defends the traditional and conservative image of Spanish women characterized by their ignorance, fervent religiosity and dependence on men. Condemning foreign education and independent conduct in his feminine characters, Pereda attempts to underline the dangers that threaten Spanish society from abroad: Naturalism, feminine emancipation and intellectual women among others. Exposing the limitations and false idealization of Pereda's female model, Pardo Bazán demonstrates an acute awareness of the impossibility of maintaining such strict gender differentiation in Spanish society any longer.

Although Pereda and Pardo Bazán's approaches to feminine identity and educational development for women were absolutely different, they shared the deep sense of class distinction that characterized Spanish society until the last decades of twentieth-century. If Naturalism contributed to the discussion of women's issues in Spain, the artistic movement did not help to raise social concerns.

⁵ Distancing herself from the label 'feminine literature' was important for the Countess, as this form was considered second class, being written by women for women.

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