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# 1 Introduction: Literature and Male Violence

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On 25 November 1960, the sisters Patria, Minerva and María Teresa Mirabal, opponents of the dictatorial regime gripping the Dominican Republic, died in an accident caused by agents of President Rafael Leónidas Trujillo.<sup>1</sup> Almost four decades later, in memory of the three activists, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly established 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The resolution passed in 1999 institutionalised the prevention of this scourge on an international scale for the first time: it *invited* “worldwide organization of activities on that day to raise public awareness of the problem of violence against women” in order to prevent physical, sexual and psychological harm and to promote the human rights of women and girls.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, South African lawyer Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur (between 2009 and 2015) on violence against women, presented the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*. Manjoo, who described the phenomenon as a “global epidemic”, noted the many forms of discrimination and violence against women and pointed out that women’s conditions

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Feast of the Goat* (2002), Mario Vargas Llosa foregrounds the dictator’s sexually predatory nature and the devastating effect of structural *machismo* on Dominican women.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/news/vawd.html>.

and individual attributes can render them more vulnerable. Thus, she argued that a solution to this phenomenon would require a transnational approach. According to Manjoo, violence must be situated on a continuum and we must acknowledge violence that occurs outside the interpersonal sphere, i.e. violence that is structural in nature and grounded in institutional inequality and the various social and economic hierarchies between women and men, as well as among women themselves. Accordingly, she argued that women's rights must be ensured as regards standard of living, education and culture, political and civil engagement, and self-determination. In the recommendations section, she urged "governments, non-state actors and local activists" to "promote a holistic response to identifying, preventing, and ultimately ending, all forms of violence against women" (Manjoo 2011, 21). She also advocated situating this violence within the sphere of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights, as only then can we recognise its universality and identify how it intersects with other factors. Manjoo observed that beyond enforcing laws that protect against discrimination and violence, penalise offenders and redress the harm done, a multidimensional approach to ending this phenomenon involves, among other actions, strengthening education to stop the creation and reproduction of prejudices and stereotypes that underlie discrimination and violence.

In addition to policies on the protection of the rights and integrity of women and girls put forth by the United Nations and its various Member States, over the last decade there have been increasingly vociferous social and public responses, with greater transnational coverage and mobilisation,<sup>3</sup> to new cases of violence. International media coverage (which has not always been adequate, unfortunately) and social media activism by members of the public with a growing feminist awareness have played a key role in this.

Among the most relevant mass mobilisations were the 2012 protests in India against the gang rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi;<sup>4</sup> the #BringBackOurGirls activist campaign to demand the rescue of the more than two hundred girls kidnapped in Nigeria on 14 April 2014 by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram;<sup>5</sup> the massive "Ni una menos" (Not one less) crowd marches on 3 June 2015 in

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**3** In order to challenge the alleged universality of global feminism and international feminism, which is based on an ethnocentric and homogenising Western pattern, transnational feminism seeks to pursue "the creation of cross-border alliances that can transform asymmetrical power relations imaginatively inscribed in the so-called North and South" (Castro, Spoturno 2020, 17-18). For this reason, we favour the use of the word 'transnational' in our guide.

**4** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Delhi\\_gang\\_rape\\_and\\_murder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape_and_murder)

**5** <https://bringbackourgirls.ng/>.

Argentina, Chile and Uruguay to rally against femicides;<sup>6</sup> the gang rape perpetrated by five men in Pamplona during the San Fermín festival in 2016 and the controversial trial of the case, known as the La Manada case;<sup>7</sup> the emergence of the viral #MeToo movement, which spread from the United States to the whole world in 2017, soon after the various accusations of sexual harassment and rape against the powerful Hollywood filmmaker and producer Harvey Weinstein were made public;<sup>8</sup> the national and transnational feminist solidarity towards “Las 17”, the women imprisoned for suffering a miscarriage and accused of “aggravated murder” by the courts of El Salvador, led by Teodora Vásquez;<sup>9</sup> the performance of the piece *Un violador en tu camino* (A Rapist in Your Path) by the Valparaíso-based feminist group Las Tesis in Chile in 2019, renditions of which were later performed by feminists in many other countries;<sup>10</sup> and the vehement women-led protests in Iran in 2022 in response to the death of twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-born Masha Amini while in the custody of the morality police, who had arrested her because she was wearing her Islamic headscarf incorrectly on the street.

These demonstrations are acts of protest and an expression of women’s anger – and, to a much lesser degree, sometimes also men’s, it must be said – towards a phenomenon that is not abating, but quite the opposite. They are all part of what has come to be known as fourth-wave feminism – although the use of the wave metaphor to track the movement’s timeline is in question, among other reasons, because of its Western bias – in which transnational connectivity through social media, mass mobilisations and the 8 March strikes (especially in 2018 and 2019) against discrimination, harassment and violence have become a political rally with transnational impact.

In response to this climate of local and transnational outrage, institutions have been joining the goal of ending violence against women and girls around the world, with varying degrees of effectiveness and commitment. Perhaps the most symbolically charged and transnationally impactful example is the awarding of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Iraqi Nadia Murad, a survivor of sexual violence and an activist committed to the fight against trafficking in women, and to Congolese feminist activist Denis Mukwege, a doctor specialising in healing genital injuries caused by rape and caring for women,

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6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ni\\_una\\_menos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ni_una_menos).

7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Manada\\_rape\\_case](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Manada_rape_case).

8 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo_movement).

9 The documentary about the Salvadoran women prisoners *Fly So Far* (2021), starring Vásquez and directed by Celina Escher, has received several awards, including the Audience Award for Best Feature Film at the 2022 Human Rights Film Festival.

10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Rapist\\_in\\_Your\\_Path](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Rapist_in_Your_Path).

who has treated 70,000 survivors of sexual violence at Panzi Hospital since 1999,<sup>11</sup> as he explains in *The Power of Women* (2022, 92).<sup>12</sup>

The growing rates of male violence (partly accelerated by the COVID-19 lockdowns and also affecting minors and elderly people living together in family homes); the fact that this scourge has taken a new and pre-eminent place in the public consciousness (Nussbaum 2022), and the rise of neoconservative populisms that represent a step backwards in terms of rights for women, girls and queer<sup>13</sup> communities, among other groups, have prompted gender-focused laws and institutional policies that seek to build fairer and safer societies for all. Following UN mandates, more and more countries are joining the mission to put an end to rape culture<sup>14</sup> – one of the leading causes of sexual violence – and to promote a culture of consent.<sup>15</sup> Spain, a pioneer in making policies to tackle this problem, has a plan in place that obliges public authorities to prevent, raise awareness about and detect male violence and to protect and guarantee the safety, care and comprehensive reparation of the women who suffer it. This plan also prescribes “combating denialism, hate speech and the effects of anti-feminist rhetoric”, as stated in the *Estrategia estatal para combatir las violencias machistas 2022-2025* (‘State strategy to combat male violence 2022-2025’, Ministry of Equality 2022, 172).

These policies urgently need to be scaled up transnationally, as well as suitably adapted to the needs and idiosyncrasies of different social, cultural and natural environments in order to avoid Eurocentric biases. Studies show with overwhelming evidence that in any

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**11** <https://panzifoundation.org/>.

**12** Also in 2018, Teodora Vásquez, the spokesperson of “Las 17”, received the Per Anger Prize in Sweden.

**13** Given the multiplicity of sexual and gender identities (including both traditionally established identities and those determined as new categories), which are constantly being revised, this guide does not intend to cover the whole range of possibilities for referring to this diverse group of people. Although this is not the appropriate place to go into the many debates, approaches and theoretical reflections around this topic, we advise the reader to take this diversity into account in order to avoid the type of homogenisation that legitimises heterocentric, binary and biology-centred discourse. Here, avoiding current debates on the term, ‘queer’ is used to refer to people who do not conform to the traditional gender binary and thus do not identify as male or female or with the identities put forth by the heteronormative model. Considering this diversity of identities, in this guide we refer to male violence against women and girls who identify or are identified as such.

**14** See the glossary for a definition of this concept.

**15** In Spain, where in 2021 sexual crimes increased by 34.6% compared to the year prior according to the National Statistics Institute (97.9% of which were perpetrated by men), the sexual consent law, popularly known as the “only yes means yes” law, was passed on 25 August 2022 and came into force on 7 October 2022. The issue of legally broaching consent is well covered in *Les choses humaines* (2019), a novel by Karine Tuil that was made into a film by Yvan Attal, *The Accusation* (2021).

crisis situation – whether a result of war, economic downturn, climate change or a pandemic – violence against women escalates. In addition to implementing depatriarchalising plans, it is equally essential to imagine forms of respectful coexistence that rely on the equal agency of people of all identities and conditions in order to build post-violent societies, i.e. societies that neither normalise violence nor place it at the centre of power discourse (Vergès 2022).

The rise of mass feminism has led to the practice of interpreting the “map of violence as a network that connects gender-based violence to economic, financial, political, institutional and social violence” (Gago 2019, 88) taking root among the public. Ending all forms of violence against women and girls is a priority objective across the entire spectrum of current feminist activism and theories. Although in the English-speaking world the struggle against sexual violence became relevant in feminist movements from the 1970s onwards, it is only more recently that it has been brought to the forefront (Baker 2008). Thus, Rosa Cobo states that “the vindictive body of fourth-wave feminism is, without a doubt, sexual violence” (2019, 138).<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of feminism in cultural and artistic institutions – which, as in all areas of knowledge, are traditionally dominated by men – has brought to light the responsibility that these institutions have had in building and preserving patriarchal systems throughout history. In order to counteract these secular dynamics, subversive and emancipatory creations are being developed in different cultural and artistic spheres which, as far as male violence is concerned, are increasingly embracing a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach, as this problem demands.

Literary creation and the book market have had a significant capacity for agency in current forms of feminism. In recent years we have witnessed a veritable boom in the publication of classic and contemporary texts which, from a greater or lesser degree of feminist awareness and militancy, denounce interpersonal, systemic and symbolic violence against women.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, a growing corpus of works is shaping new restorative, post-violent imaginaries that focus on sustaining a dignified life, with points of view and characters that transgress the patriarchal and androcentric nature of literary canons.<sup>18</sup> Some of them aim to raise awareness among and politically challenge

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**16** Also of particular relevance is the politicisation of “care, romantic love, motherhood, sexuality, prostitution or pornography, just as new patriarchal phenomena, like surrogacy, are being politicised” (Cobo 2019, 135).

**17** A paradigmatic example is *El encaje roto. Antología de cuentos de violencia contra las mujeres* (2018), by Emilia Pardo Bazán.

**18** A literary canon is a repertoire of the most relevant works (usually written by men) of a nation or a non-national literary space, such as Catalonia, traditionally established by and for men.

readers. Paradigmatic examples include *Priya's Shakti* (2014),<sup>19</sup> a comic published in response to the 2012 events in Delhi in order to raise awareness and promote social change with regard to rape in India (Chattopadhyay 2019); *La casa de la fuerza* (2011), by Angélica Liddell, a play that uses belligerent rhetoric to condemn the Mexican government's collusion in the Ciudad Juárez femicides, linking them to male violence in Spain (Nicolau, Iribarren 2020); and *Jauria* (2019), a play by Jordi Casanovas based on the La Manada case, which challenges rape culture through the technique of verbatim theatre.

Closely intertwined with this surge of works is the emergence of resistant reading, a phenomenon born out of the feminist movements of the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> It is a cultural practice with great symbolic power that seeks to transform consciences. The term 'resisting reader' was coined by Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978). Fetterley claims that literature is political and that women have traditionally had men's (often misogynistic) viewpoints and value systems imposed on them against their own subjectivity. As many of her arguments are still pertinent today, we believe it is fitting to revisit them through Noelia Pena's summary in the article *Por una desobediencia lectora* (Towards reading disobedience):

By demonstrating reluctance, so-called 'resisting readers' seek to unmask the complicit relations between characters and authors in order to decipher, using the various narrative codes, the ideology underlying the texts that exclude them. Judith Fetterley invites us to resist traditional coding and reject the parameters established by the androcentric structure as a matter of course. The concept of 'resisting reader' also implies considering the will and agency of women readers, leading us to think of 'reader empowerment', which would arise from our awareness of having been educated to think like men and identify with the male point of view. Reading from this feminist perspective would mean 'resisting' rather than 'assenting', which entails challenging the text's authority; similarly, Fetterley's questioning calls into doubt the very truthfulness of the version of events presented to us by texts. This resistance involves an effort to relinquish received ideas and the paradigmatic proposals for reading that we have uncritically embraced for much of our lives. (Pena 2019, 115-16, Authors' translation)

19 <https://www.priyashakti.com/>.

20 It should be noted that there are other related concepts, such as the notion of 'criticism as sabotage' developed by Manuel Asensi (2007). This is the practice of disobediently interpreting authority by displacing the referential horizon, identifying the underlying ideologies of discourse-shaping action, and adopting the plural and mobile point of view of the subaltern.

University institutions have not been untouched by the government policies and grassroots initiatives that have come about as part of the recent feminist uprising. Literary studies have begun to pay increasing attention both to the production of works depicting violence against women published in recent years and to the cultural and political practice of resistant reading, which makes it possible to detect narrative strategies, codes, stereotypes, clichés, fads, language uses, imaginaries and ideologies that normalise and underpin this violence.

Faculty interest in, and commitment to, ending this ‘global epidemic’ has led to studies such as the monograph *Women and Violence in Italian Literature* (2018), coordinated by Gregoria Manzin and Barbara Pezzotti; *Rethinking the Victim. Gender and Violence in Contemporary Australian Women’s Writing* (2019), edited by Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew; and *#MeToo and Literary Studies. Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture* (2021), edited by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett.

Students in the field of literary studies have also joined the fray in a progressively notable way, producing undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral theses on works depicting male violence. There have been several key factors at play: firstly, the possibility of breaking the silence and channelling the rage expressed by women in the streets and on social media into the halls of ivy, which has resulted in critical feminist practices such as challenges against cryptogyny<sup>21</sup> and silencing, anti-feminist disciplinary conservatism; and, secondly, the obligation of universities to adopt a gender perspective across all their course plans and research, which has encouraged many new feminist readings of literary works.

An exploration of the academic works available in open access in university repositories on the subject shows that most of them have been written by women. If we work off the assumption that literary work is also political discourse, we may find that female students are rebelling against literary curricula which, as Elaine Showalter pointed out in 1971 in *Women and the Literary Curriculum*, often train them to adopt an androcentric perspective and, therefore, to alienate their own life, reading, artistic and cultural experiences.

However, in our teaching experience, we have found that students struggle considerably to design and carry out projects of this nature. Apart from being well versed in literary matters, this type of study requires students to mobilise knowledge of male violence and rigorously use the associated concepts, which are complex and controversial (sometimes undergoing constant redefinition) and draw from multiple disciplines. Moreover, they must be able to interrelate this multiplicity of disciplinary knowledge with four highly demanding

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**21** See the glossary for a definition of this concept.

skills: literary reading, academic writing, critical thinking and ethical commitment.

This makes the challenge particularly daunting. To begin with, two phenomena need to be considered. Firstly, it is only very recently that new reading frameworks that cease to reproduce the patriarchal and androcentric paradigms of the canon, or even challenge them, have begun to be taught throughout the educational process, from primary to secondary school. Traditional reading schemes, so deeply rooted in and symbolically associated with the hegemonic voices that have forged the discipline, make it difficult to carry out new readings. Students are often unable to formulate interpretative proposals that question the authority of most of the available bibliography, nor do they have a sufficiently rich corpus of resistant reading samples, especially those carried out under feminist paradigms. Secondly, neither students nor teachers have concept maps, theoretical and analytical frameworks, glossaries, teaching materials, discursive models and references at their disposal to help them undertake this type of project in the humanities.

All these factors come as a massive hindrance to the growing number of students wishing to carry out literary studies in tune with the concern and denunciation of male violence. The same is true for the teachers responsible for supporting and guiding them. In some cases, these obstacles have led students, despite their good intentions, to end up reproducing language, textual interpretations, apriorism, extratextual judgements and values that betray the will and aim that originally inspired them. It is easy to unwittingly fall into essentialism, universalism, dogmatism, the reproduction of clichés, interpretative poverty or the discourse of victimhood and condescending compassion. This is often the result of having mechanically applied preconceived judgements and having lost sight of the nature of literary discourse, focusing instead on the extratextual realities portrayed by texts (for example, unconscious ethnocentrism can lead to generalisations such as “Peruvian women have a special bond with the land”). The danger lies in not understanding the boundary between fact and fiction, and the error comes from making a dogmatic critique of the world rather than a literary critique of the text that recreates the world (whether a poem, play, novel, memoir, etc.).

*Literature and male violence. A guide for academic research* seeks to address this need. It provides the academic community with an analytical framework that can be applied rigorously, productively and critically when writing interpretative discourse on literary works that depict violence against women and girls. In other words, by presenting an analytical framework, the guide aims to support the design of research and literary readings in line with decoding parameters that seek to subvert their traditional predecessors in order



to promote emancipatory academic discourse based on recognition and respect (Assmann 2013).

Our analytical framework encourages users to apply a layer of complexity to their textual interpretations, so as to go beyond the study of orthodox elements (e.g. dialogue with tradition, characters, plot, time, space, literary genre, narrative point of view, language, rhetorical devices, form, style, or aesthetic, mimetic, metaphorical or symbolic aspects). How? By questioning the works from a gender, decolonial and intersectional perspective in order to critically analyse the treatment of connections, conflicts and entities such as bodies, voices and hierarchies between people, which have often normalised or concealed violence.

Therefore, our proposal aims to help discern the explicit or underlying ideology of texts, and to problematise it with a critical attitude and emancipatory will; that is, to activate resistant reading. This is the only way, in our opinion, to acquire the breadth of vision and interpretative finesse necessary to expose dynamics of oppression, privilege, subordination or dominance and to become aware of the violence that has been committed or suffered, while overcoming the categorical dichotomy of woman-victim and man-aggressor.

Our conviction is that literature, through its ability to present and weave together characters, places and times in a very complex way, shows that identities are not absolute, but are created by a narrative that reproduces ideological assumptions; that plots, perspectives and other narrative, poetic and dramatic strategies favour a certain understanding of violence. Thus, literary texts also have the ability to create innovative imaginaries with respect to the structures that have made such violence possible. This same understanding should make it easier to reveal acts of resistance that may appear in texts (carried out by subversive female characters), defying dominant male norms and foreshadowing post-patriarchal and post-violent scenarios. The analytical framework we propose, therefore, seeks to bolster the agency of literary studies in building discourses – by no means dogmatic or naïve – that imagine horizons for the future based on dignified individual and collective ways of life that respect their social and natural environment.

What makes this difficult is the fact that all the constituent parts of a literary text are inseparable, as is violence. Therefore, analysing these parts requires an open, profound and interrelated approach. We must be prepared to leave behind inflexible premises and prejudices and overcome attitudes that resist new viewpoints and ideas. Importantly, the challenge is not only intellectual. It also encompasses emotional, affective and aesthetic dimensions, which each reader experiences differently depending on their own identity, social status, background and life circumstances, interests, tastes, sensibility and literary, cultural and linguistic knowledge. Good academic reading

must therefore contemplate this multiplicity of issues in order to allow for dialogue with other readers, as well as for individual agency in constructing the meaning of the literary text.

The guide also aims to strengthen the humanities, and more specifically the discipline of literature. How? By joining in the mission to transform imaginaries, practices and attitudes, to encourage the formulation of new questions, and to exhort resistance to patriarchal and androcentric dynamics and values. With regard to certain works, it even aims to foster empathetic attitudes towards the wounds and pain of others, and to promote their recognition and reparation. Hence, we encourage users of this guide to view literary reading as a formative project and academic writing as a venue for intellectual creation and perhaps affective expression, from which one thinks about one's own subjectivity, questions the world in a new, radical way, and takes part in building a politically and ethically committed reading community. Ultimately, the guide seeks to reinforce the potential of resistant reading, calling on readers to stand against one of the major challenges of today's world: ending violence against women and girls.

The present guide has seven sections: this introduction; a section that lays out and defines the types and spheres of violence against women; a presentation of basic instructional guidelines for carrying out a project or writing an essay on literary texts that depict male violence (aimed mainly at students); three proposals for teaching innovation (aimed mainly at teachers); a basic glossary of key terms; a list of contemporary literary works to study (some with academic papers or projects already carried out on them); and a list of references especially selected for carrying out this type of project. Given the interest in studying the most current production, our proposal focuses on strictly contemporary literature.

Drawing on research carried out in the Catalan academic and literary environment,<sup>22</sup> this guide does not aim to be exhaustive either in theoretical<sup>23</sup> or methodological terms or in the list of suggested readings and references. Rather, it sets out a starting point that will require updating. Its use will allow us to identify limitations

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**22** That is why, for instance, we have used the Catalan legislative framework of male violence and there is a substantial number of Catalan literary works in the suggested texts for study.

**23** It is beyond the scope of this guide to provide an overview of feminist theories, which are the theories that have dealt centrally with violence against women and girls. Depending on the nature of a work of literature, one could apply the conceptual framework or intersecting proposals of any of the multiple forms of feminism, which are often at odds with each other (equality feminism, difference feminism, Marxist feminism, anti-capitalist feminism, post-colonial feminism, anti-racist feminism, indigenous feminism, Afro-descendant feminism, carceral feminism, abolitionist feminism, ecofeminism, transnational feminism, etc.).

or shortcomings that will need to be addressed in future revisions. Moreover, in the coming years we are sure to see the rise of new analytical proposals, theoretical interpretations and legal provisions that will need to be incorporated. Although our analytical framework falls within the literary discipline, the guide can be a useful educational resource for students and teachers in any field of the humanities. Hopefully, it can also serve as a source of inspiration for similar guides in other disciplines.

In order to disseminate the guide as widely as possible, we have decided to publish it in three languages - Catalan, Spanish and English - in open access under a Creative Commons licence. To ensure the quality of its content, three academic experts in literature and/or gender studies - Caterina Riba, Adriana Nicolau and Begonya Enguix - carried out a pre-publication review. We would like to thank them for their committed and rigorous observations and suggestions for improvement, which we have included in the final version. We would also like to publicly acknowledge the master's degree student Arola Castella Pujol, who was the first to use this guide when it was still a draft, showing us how we could make it even more helpful for students.

