Conflicting Memories and Families in Conflict: Identity and Otherness in Contemporary Basque Literature[1]

Izaro Arroita Azkarate
PhD, Professor of the Department of Didactics of Language and Literature,
University of the Basque Country
(Basque Country)

Abstract:

Contemporary Basque literature shows a clear interest in our conflictive past. A growing number of works deal with the Spanish Civil War, Franco's dictatorship, or all that we commonly call the 'Basque conflict'. Although there is a variety of literary perspectives and approaches, we can observe some recurring motifs that may be especially significant for understanding the negotiations on memory and identity in the Basque Country. Specifically, I will analyze some narratives in which that Other who can be represented as a perpetrator or as a political opponent (a Falangist, a terrorist), also appears as a relative, as a member who destabilizes the family genealogy, and provokes an identity crisis, both individual and collective. From this perspective, I will analyze novels such as *Atertu arte itxaron* (Agirre, 2015, translated into Spanish as *Los turistas desganados*) or *Soinujolearen semea* (Atxaga, 2003, translated into English as *The Accordionist's son*, 2008), but also chronicles such as *Gurea falangista zen* (Barandiaran, 2021, ['Ours was Falangist']). This analysis will lead us to reflect on the problematic (de)construction of Basque identity in the present, and on the main role played by our conflicting memories in this process.

Keywords: Identity, Conflict, Basque literature

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Basque literature shows a clear interest in our troubled past. A growing number of works deal with the Spanish Civil War, Franco's dictatorship, or all that we commonly call the 'Basque conflict', the struggle between ETA and the Spanish and French states. There is a variety of literary and political approaches: Contemporary Basque literature makes us reflect on different aspects of violence; on victims and perpetrators; on the origins of our conflicts; on intergenerational transmission or on the gap between generations; on the construction of memories and identities, and on their changing and fragmentary condition.

Despite this variety, we can observe some recurring motifs that may be especially significant from the perspective of memory studies, for understanding the negotiations on memory and identity in the Basque Country. In this paper, I will focus on one of these motifs: Specifically, I will analyze some narratives in which the Other is a political opponent, but also a relative, a member who destabilizes the family genealogy, and provokes an identity crisis, both individual and collective.

Of course, when we speak of the Other, we must keep in mind that the Other is always somehow implicit in the construction of memory and identity. This is what Halbwachs' pioneering work "On Collective Memory" demonstrates: that we need a "social framework" to reconstruct our memories. According to Halbwachs, our social environment, the people around us, have a direct influence, completing, shaping or distorting our memories. Collective memory constantly (re)constructs according to the needs and interests a group has in the present, and that construction, that collective awareness of the past, gives continuity to the group's identity. Thus, the construction of memory and identity are closely connected, because collective memory links the individual to the group, and the past to the present.

Halbwachs distinguishes between various forms of collective memories; family memories are one of those forms. In the context of my analysis, I am interested in the intergenerational transmission of memories, to observe how the younger generations are affected by the memories of those Others who preceded them. In short, we are talking about postmemory, to quote Hirsch (1997, p. 22):

> Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.

When we talk about postmemory in Basque literature, those traumatic events are very often related to the Spanish Civil War and to the 'Basque Conflict'. In this paper, I will comment on some literary works that bring the political conflict to the family and individual level. I will focus on a recurring motif: That Other who lived through the traumatic events of the past is a family member; but is also a political opponent for the main protagonist. This will lead us to reflect on the consequences of this intergenerational clash; to reflect on conflicting filiations and uncomfortable family memories.

From this perspective, I will briefly analyze the historical and the ideological context of the protagonists and their relatives in two novels: *Atertu arte itxaron* (Agirre, 2015, translated into Spanish as *Los turistas desganados,* 2017) and *Soinujolearen semea* (Atxaga, 2003, translated into English as *The Accordionist's son,* 2008). Likewise, I will discuss the chronicle *Gurea falangista zen* (Barandiaran, 2021, ['Our grandfather was a Falangist']). This analysis will lead us to reflect on the problematic (de)construction of Basque identity in the present, and on the main role played by our conflicting memories in this process.

2. A conflicting paternal legacy

The Accordionist's son narrates the awakening of the protagonist David (the accordionist's son) to the recent past, to the horrors of the Civil War, and to the direct responsibility that his father had in the repression of

several men of Obaba, his hometown. In reflecting this clash with the father, one element is particularly significant in the novel: The lists.

They are mentioned for the first time at the beginning of the novel. It is at the end of the 20th century, in San Francisco, and David just meets Mary Ann, his future wife. They are in a restaurant where an accordionist is playing, and David starts talking about his father, admitting that they never got along very well. He explains her that when he was a child, he used to make lists:

> 'My mother called them, my lists of favourites,' I said, unable to stop now. 'I used to list the names of the people I loved: first, the person I loved most, then, the person I loved a lot, but slightly less than the first person, and so on. Well, my father soon disappeared from the list entirely' (Atxaga, 2008, p. 29).

The reason is precisely another list; the list of the men shot in Obaba during the Civil War. It is written in a notebook that, as indicated on the cover, belonged to his father, Ángel, who is a Falangist, a man who supported Franco during the war. The discovery of the notebook was traumatic for David in his youth, during the dictatorship; it was an awakening that marked his life forever.

The young protagonist became obsessed with the notebook and the list: "The memory of the notebook took such a hold on my mind that it almost drove me mad (…) The list went with me everywhere" (Atxaga, 2008: 131). He was mostly worried about what degree of responsibility his father may have had in the murder of those men: "It makes me feel physically sick to think that I might be the son of a man who has blood on his hands'" (Atxaga, 2008, pp. 129-130). Obsessed with the names on the list, David imagined those men repeatedly:

> Night after night, when I stared with my Second Eyers into that filthy cave, those four figures took on more substance – on a par with the figures of Ángel and Berlino [his father's close friend] – and ceased to be mere shadows. My doubts gradually melted away. That recent history needed no messengers. Those images and the gaze of the gorilla on the cover of the notebook were enough. That look was saying: 'What do you make of all this, David? Was your father a

murderer?' The gorilla seemed prepared to continue repeating those questions for a hundred years (Atxaga, 2008, p. 131).

David needed to investigate to clarify the degree of responsibility his father had in the shootings. He needed to know if it was he who wrote those names in the notebook. So, he analyzed the handwriting of his father, Ángel, and of his friend Berlino:

> *Humberto, Goena Senior, Goena Junior, 'the teachers', 'the American'.* There was no doubt about it, it was the same handwriting. Those names had been written by Berlino, by Martxel. And 'Otero' had almost certainly been written by him as well. Then again, he had clearly not written 'Eusebio' and 'Portaburu'. They – and the matter was much clearer now– had been written by his close friend Ángel.
> My initial relief didn't last long. Berlino seemed to have been the instigator, but Ángel was still a murderer and not just an innocent who, in the confusion of war, had found himself caught in a compromising situation; nor was he a coward forced by circumstances to become an accomplice. No, alas, he had been more than that (Atxaga, 2008, p. 153).

This discovery will mean a definitive separation with his father. The circumstances will lead him to become involved in the anti-Franco struggle, in hiding. Finally, he will abandon that struggle to start a new life in the American exile.

As we know, this need to investigate the traumatic past related to the civil war also appears in other Iberian literatures. In analyzing the novels of Spanish writers such as Javier Cercas, Javier Marías, Dulce Chacón, Ignacio Martínez de Pisón or Almudena Grandes, Sebastian Faber (2011) notes the insistence on the idea that present generations have a moral obligation – as well as a psychological need – to investigate the past and assume its legacy. As Faber points out, we often find a young protagonist who engages in an investigation and discovers a historical truth related to the previous generation; he/she has to face the dilemmas that arise when taking on that legacy and learns a life-transforming lesson.

The difference in Basque literature is that this need to investigate the past often connects with a political and armed conflict that has affected the protagonists –and Basque society in general– decades after the end of the

war and the dictatorship. In that sense, as Olaziregi (2011) states, *The Accordionist's son* does not just simply seek to recuperate a traumatic past, but rather to reflect on the influence that this past has exerted on subsequent Basque generations, ones that, as happens with the protagonists in the novel, go from dictatorial repression to armed struggle.

In the case of *Atertu arte itxaron* (Agirre, 2015), there is also a traumatic discovery; there is also a conflicting paternal legacy. But the main action is not set in the Civil War or Francoism, but in the summer of 2011, shortly before the definitive cessation of ETA's armed activity. The protagonist of the novel, Ulia (a Basque woman from Vitoria) and her partner Gustavo travel by car through the Basque Country. They live in Madrid and have decided to drive through her homeland just taking secondary roads, to enjoy a quiet vacation. But the recent discovery of her father's story will cut short the pleasure trip.

Ulia always thought her father had died years ago, in a car accident, but her mother reveals to her that he is alive; that he is in jail. As Ulia learns, he is a member of ETA arrested in 1987, convicted for being the leader of the Madrid Commando and for participating in attacks such as the one in Guzmán el Bueno Street. She constantly reads news and reports about her father:

> In the trial it was proven that he was the one who placed a van bomb […] in front of the General Directorate of the Civil Guard in Guzmán el Bueno Street in Madrid. As a result of the explosion, twenty-four civil guards were injured, but worse luck befell the twin brothers Pablo and Fabián, only two and a half years old, who were killed as the family car was driving next to the van bomb at the exact moment when it exploded (Agirre, 2015, p. 149).

The novel brings us here echoes of our recent history: The attack against the General Directorate of the Civil Guard, in November 1988. ETA killed Luis Delgado Villalonga (a two-and-a-half-year-old boy), and Jaime Bilbao Iglesias, a man who worked for Spanish Television. Many other people were injured.

The novel also brings echoes of other attacks, such as the one against the Civil Guard residential barracks in Zaragoza, in December 1987. ETA killed eleven people and wounded eighty-eight others. Esther and Miriam Barrera Alcaraz died in that attack; they were twins, only three years old.

In the novel, the father's terrible story haunts Ulia on her journey, because he is constantly in all the media, twenty-four years after his imprisonment. The reason is that he is on hunger strike, asking for justice, because his sentence has been extended, even though he is seriously ill. Like the protagonist of Atxaga's novel, Ulia needs to know, to investigate about her father's guilt. She reads everything she can find about her father, such as the article by a tabloid journalist who pursues them on their journey:

The blood of these innocent children, of their parents and of the twenty-four civil guards wounded on that fateful night still injects the gaze of this murderer who, from a hospital bed, claims to demand "justice".

> This is not the first time I read the story. I already know all the existing versions of the story. Some put the focus on other circumstances. But I can never get enough. Where does this thirst come from. I haven't opened the floodgates, but now that they are open, I want to dive, dive, hold my breath as long as it takes. With good underwater goggles that allow me to see everything. I have googled everything that can be googled. I have been to Guzmán el Bueno. Also, in the street where the commando fell. I have seen it all. Walked trying not to arouse any suspicion. Just an innocent walk to clear my head after spending a whole day in front of the computer. Short walks, at a brisk pace.
>
> Me, strolling. Me, on this sidewalk. Me, suddenly petrified. Me, lost in morbid thoughts. Me, trying to relativize everything. I continue the walk. The two children. Their parents. So long ago. Lost in morbid thoughts. Me (Agirre, 2015: 149-150).

It is a traumatic filiation. Ulia travels to Granada, to meet her father in prison, but is finally unable to visit him. The story of her father provokes a crisis in Ulia and will also influence her relationship with Gustavo. She is unable to tell him the truth, as if she were implicated in her father's story. Thus, as Olaziregi (2021) states, the novel reflects on guilt, collective responsibility, and the legacy that part of Basque society has received after decades of violence.

3. The Falangist grandfather

We find similar motifs in *Gurea falagista zen* ['Our grandfather was a Falangist'] (2021), an interesting chronicle by the Basque journalist and writer Alberto Barandiaran. His research work begins with an offer from his mother-in-law: having just turned eighty, she gives him a notebook written by her brother Luis Fernandez during the civil war. Luis joined the Falange and died in combat at the age of eighteen.

The journalist wonders what could have motivated him to join the Falange, if he had previously been a Basque nationalist, and there was no Falangist tradition in his village. His mother-in-law gives him permission to investigate her family's past: "Do whatever you want with this". It is just the opposite of the discourse that prevailed for decades: don't ask questions; why dig up old stories, the names of people who have passed away? (Barandiaran, 2021, pp. 105-106).

But in researching Luis Fernandez, the journalist comes across the name of his own grandfather, Pablo Amillano, also a Falangist, who apparently participated in the repression against other men of his hometown. Faced with such a discovery, Barandiaran begins to analyze testimonies. Many witnesses mention his grandfather, Pablo Amillano, in recounting the last days of Somocurcio and Chicharro, two men from his town who were tried and shot during the war.

Barandiaran delves into his research because he has an urgent need to know. He consults the Documentary Fund of Historical Memory in Navarre, the Gogora Institute of the Basque Government, and the Aranzadi Science Society:

> I insisted. I wanted more information about the summary trials, specifically, about the intervention of Pablo Amillano. If, as the witnesses affirmed, he recognized and pointed out Somocurcio and Chicharro among the Santoña prisoners, I wanted to know if my grandfather participated in the trial that sent the two leftist combatants to the firing line, if he was a witness. If he went expressly to accuse them. If he traveled from Alsasua to Santoña, leaving his family in his hometown (...) to testify against two men from his hometown. If my grandfather made the conscious decision to testify in order to take two neighbors to the firing line, that was what I needed to know (Barandiaran, 2021, p. 81).

Once again, the discovery of uncomfortable family memories leads to an individual crisis. Barandiaran needs to know more, to get answers about the involvement of his ancestors in events he considers atrocious. The discovery also leads to a reflection on guilt and collective responsibility, on the silences that have been imposed and inherited in families and in Basque society in general. In Barandiaran's words: "the research on Luis Fernandez, which was supposed to be merely historical and documentary, put a question mark on the memory of my grandfather. And what was intended to be a report became an exercise of memory" (Barandiaran, 2021, pp. 106-107). This exercise involves breaking the silence of his family, uncovering their hidden past:

> Our family always hid its Falangist past. When we asked, they only told us that he was pro-Franco. But it is not easy to hide everything forever. Because question marks generate the need to know more. Question marks pull, as if they were turned hooks (Barandiaran, 2021: 107-108).

At the beginning, he finds a few mentions, not very clarifying taken separately. But, taken together, these testimonies question the memory of his grandfather, because they prove that, beyond having a specific ideology, he used his position to influence the decisions about the lives of some men from his village.

In the end, thanks to Ricardo Urrizola's research *Consejo de guerra. Injusticia militar en Navarra 1936-40*, the journalist dives into the mud, hooked by the question mark, and the answers begin to emerge: His grandfather, Pablo Amillano, appears as a Falange informant in some summary trials against some men from Alsasua. These reports were used as evidence and had a significant influence on the sentences.

Barandiaran understands that his grandfather fought for his ideas, even though ideologically he is on the opposite side. But he constantly wonders what drove his grandfather to testify against his neighbors in trials that could have sent them to the firing line (Barandiaran, 2021: 110). Even though it is not possible to answer that question, Barandiaran continues to investigate the silenced past of his family, because he wants to know it and tell it; because he believes it will be good for him and for his family (Barandiaran, 2021: 109). Thus, he criticizes the blanket of fear and silence that

covered the stories of war and repression and cut off intergenerational transmission:

> That forced silence would influence the following decades, when the ideological, political, and armed clash divided families and peoples again and a storm of repression shook the Basque Country for almost sixty years. The inability and tacit prohibition to speak publicly about the consequences of violence and to acknowledge the suffering of the other was repeated, and we are still suffering the consequences. That is why sometimes it is easier to know your neighbor's stories than to understand what has been hidden within the walls of your house. It is easier to search through military archives than to break the silence of one's own home (Barandiaran, 2021, mp. 113).

Journalist and poet Itziar Ugarte also alludes to the silence that has prevailed in many Basque homes. Her poem "Bikiak" ['Twins'], from the book *Gu gabe ere* (2021), is precisely based on the surprise of discovering that her beloved great-aunts, twins born in 1939, were named in honor of Franco's victory in the Civil War: Maripaz and Maribi, Paz and Victoria (that is, Peace and Victory):

> I didn't know what to say
> And I'm still searching
> Ever since I found out
> That the great-aunts
> That I've loved from afar
> Were born in 1939.
> That their names
> Hold a vindication
> Of peace and victory.
> My grandmother repeats
> That at home the issue was never mentioned.
> [...]
> It is deafening
> All that has been silenced
> To keep sitting at the same table
> To keep the flat tire turning.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, these uncomfortable filiations and conflicting family memories that recurrently appear in contemporary Basque literature imply both an individual and a collective crisis. The political conflicts that have affected Basque society begin at home, and blood ties relate the parties that are in some way at conflict.

In *The accordionist's son* (Atxaga, 2008), the protagonist's father is a Falangist involved in the repression against some leftists of his town. This discovery will lead David to grow apart and to get involved in the anti-Franco struggle. In *Atertu arte itxaron* (Agirre, 2015), the protagonist also must face the sudden discovery of a conflicting paternal legacy. In this case, her father is a member of ETA, responsible for several attacks. Ulia suffers an individual crisis, but also as a couple, as she is unable to share the burden she has received. The chronicle *Gurea falagista zen* "Our grandfather was a Falangist" (Barandiaran, 2021) deals, like the first novel, with the Civil War. In this case, the journalist, Barandiaran, discovers the Falangist past of his grandfather, his involvement in the trials against some men of his hometown.

In all three cases, these discoveries imply a pressing need to know more, and an individual and family crisis. The three works raise interesting questions about the legacy that generations of Basques have received: the silence, the suffering, the injustice, and the guilt. They question the Basque identity in the present (our collective, family, and national identity), because, as we have seen, they suggest that the other, the opponent, may be part of our own home, of our own family. Thus, through the clash between past and present, through the clash between generations and ideologies, monolithic discourses on Basque history and identity begin to crack.

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