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**Silence and Invisibility as Weapons of
Hegemonic Nationalism in Fernando
Aramburu's *Patria***

Olga Bezhanova, PhD.

Fernando Aramburu's *Patria* (2016) has undoubtedly constituted one of the most explosive publishing successes of Spain's literary market of the recent years. In its exploration of the legacy of ETA's violence, *Patria* normalizes the view of nationalism as something that exists only on the periphery of Spain and offers no insight into the ways in which the hegemonic Castilian nationalism derives its power from its very invisibility. Aramburu depicts the nationalism of the novel's Basque characters as a product of their cognitive and emotional limitations, thereby absolving his readers from any feelings of complicity in sustaining the hegemonic nationalism of the Castilian-speaking Spain. *Patria* promotes the goals of the hegemonic Castilian nationalism through insisting, time and again, that Basque separatism is nurtured by the irrational violent impulses that supposedly lie at the core of the Basque identity. The writer's geographic and affective distancing from Euskadi, which arises not only from the fact that he has been living in Germany since 1985 but also from his identity as an author who writes only in *castellano*, leads Aramburu to position Euskadi as the Other that is often menacing but hardly deserving of a nuanced literary treatment. Far from constituting a strength of the novel, as some critics have suggested (Ortiz Gambetta 56), this approach turns the novel into a collection of easily digestible stereotypes that do not facilitate a profound understanding of the Basque reality.

Aramburu's novel soothes the anxieties awakened not only by the memories of Euskadi's 'Years of Lead' but also by the exacerbation of the tensions between the Spanish state and the Catalan separatism in recent years. *Patria* begins on October 20, 2011, the day when ETA announced the end of its armed struggle, and the peak of the novel's popularity coincided with the definitive dissolution of the organization that was announced on May 3, 2018. This historic event brought ETA back into the headlines both nationally and internationally,

which is likely to guarantee the popularity of Aramburu's novel as the foundational work of literature that speaks not only to the legacy of violent Basque nationalism but also to what it means to be Basque today. This is a troubling prospect, given that Aramburu does not conceal his animosity towards cultural production in Euskera and has referred as "a fiction" to the existence of readers who may want to read literature in this language (Zaldúa, *Ese idioma* 76).

At the heart of Aramburu's best-selling novel lies silence. It seems counterintuitive to say this about a work of literature that is over six hundred pages long, yet words "silence," "silent," "speechless," and "they said nothing," as well as references to the difficulty of verbal expression, can be found in almost all of the one hundred and twenty-five of the novel's short chapters. As Iban Zaldúa points out in his incisive review of the novel, Aramburu's lack of familiarity with euskera is such that he attributes to Nerea, one of the novel's Basque-speaking characters, a feeling of stunned shock when she discovers that some Europeans speak declension-rich languages such as German ("La literatura" n. pag.). Given that euskera has a well-developed system of declensions, Nerea's confusion can only be attributed to Aramburu's lack of interest in the Basque language that seeps into his depiction of his Basque characters. As a result, the characters who are Basque-speakers are portrayed as invariably finding it hard to express themselves verbally and incapable of articulating a clear political or ideological stance.

Patria narrates a painful rift between two Basque families whose decades-long friendship turns to hatred when one of the families allies itself with ETA and the other one suffers from ETA's violence. Miren and Bittori, the two female protagonists of *Patria*, do not engage in a verbal confrontation after it becomes clear that Miren's son Joxe Mari was involved in the murder of Bittori's husband Txato. The collapse of the women's relationship occurs in the same silence that constitutes the most potent weapon of Txato's victimization at the hands of ETA in the months before his assassination. At the end of the novel, Miren and Bittori finally reconcile and embrace. Yet the last words of the novel make it clear that a frank discussion of ETA's legacy is still not possible between them¹: "It was a short embrace. The two women exchanged a brief look before pulling apart. Did they say anything to each other? No. They said nothing" (642). The silent reconciliation between Miren and Bittori is symbolic of what Aramburu attempts to achieve with the novel. The approach to Basque history that he proposes is based on remaining silent on the issues that nourished the conflict for decades and still have not been fully resolved.

¹ The translations from Spanish here and elsewhere in the article are mine.

Since its publication, the novel has gone through 32 editions, and over a million copies of *Patria* have been sold. Aramburu received several awards for the novel, including the prestigious National Prize for Narrative [Premio Nacional de Narrativa] for 2017.² The jury declared that the novel deserved the award because of “the psychological depth of its characters, the narrative tension and the integration of various viewpoints, as well as the effort to write a globalizing narrative of a tumultuous years in the Basque Country” (Cruz n. pag.). Readers have responded to *Patria* with the kind of enthusiasm that makes it clear that Aramburu has tapped into an issue of an immense interest to Spaniards and readers outside the country. The novel owes its success among readers outside of Spain not only to its author’s undoubted literary skill but also to the way in which it contributes to “the demonizing of terrorism [that] in general allows for the modern democratic state to forget its obligation to open, free, and critical discourse” (Watson 108). The discussion of Basque terrorism in *Patria* is fully in keeping with the “dehistoricizing and depoliticizing effect” of the “conflation of terrorism with terrorists” (Third 27) that characterizes much of the Western discourse on terrorism. The familiarity of Aramburu’s dismissive approach to Basque nationalism makes reading *Patria* an intellectually unchallenging experience that does not require a profound engagement with the matter of Spain’s separatist movements.

In a facetious essay published in *Vanity Fair*, Javier Aznar talks, with mock self-deprecation, about his own incapacity to produce a text that would match the popularity of Aramburu’s novel:

The other day I approached my neighborhood bookstore to see if they carried my book... What they did have, though, was *Patria*. In fact, they had mountains of *Patria*. And when I say mountains, it isn’t that I’m using poetic license. I stumbled across something like a pyramid made of *Patrias* in an aisle. And the table of new arrivals was carpeted, I repeat, car-pe-ted, with copies of Aramburu’s book. His book was being used as an ornament. A prop. (n. pag.)

Aznar’s description of bookstores overflowing with copies of *Patria* brings to mind 2001, the year when Javier Cercas’s *Soldados de Salamina* was published and high stacks of copies of the novel graced bookshop windows and store displays everywhere in Spain. The explosive success of *Soldados* contributed to making the Spanish Civil War novel the favorite genre of Spain’s readers and publishers in the first decades of the twenty-first century.³ There is every

² At the moment of this article’s writing, *Patria* brought its author Premio Euskadi de Literatura en castellano, Premio de la Crítica de Narrativa Castellana, Premio Ramón Rubial, Premio Francisco Umbral al Libro del Año, and Premio del Club Internacional de la Prensa.

³ Of course, Cercas did not invent the Civil War genre. Novels on the Spanish Civil War were published in a steady stream since the war and especially after the death of Franco. Still, the publication of *Soldados de Salamina* proved to be a turning point in the trajectory of the genre. The enormous success of Cercas’s novel

reason to believe that the enthusiastic reader response to Aramburu's *Patria* is not an isolated phenomenon but a symptom of a growing interest in the novels that discuss the legacy of ETA's violence.⁴

There are indications in the novel that the success of the Civil War genre was on the author's mind during the process of the novel's creation. One of *Patria's* most intriguing chapters describes a public lecture given by Aramburu's *alter ego* in the novel, a writer who authored a book that sounds very similar, in its scope and goals, to *Patria*. As he listens to the writer's lecture, Xabier, a character whose father was killed by ETA, echoes the sentiments expressed on multiple occasions by Aramburu himself: "Until this moment, Basque authors have paid little attention to victims of terrorism. . . Besides, ETA's terrorism cannot be used to attack the political right. The civil war is much more useful for that purpose" (553). The belief that Basque writers have avoided writing about the victims of terrorist violence is objectively untrue, yet one can perceive, in Xabier's words, traces of bitterness that a writer like Aramburu must have felt as he observed the success of the Civil War novels on the Spanish literary market.⁵ The publication of *Patria* has rectified this state of affairs, displacing the Spanish Civil War, a subject that was already exhibiting signs of exhaustion, from its privileged place in Spain's publishing industry. Unfortunately, many critics have taken at face value Aramburu's assertions that his is a lone voice in Spain's literary arena to break the silence that supposedly surrounds the issue of ETA's terrorism. Eugenia Ortiz Gambetta, for instance, believes that *Patria* broke "an ominous silence" that has existed on the subject (48). As Iban Zaldúa points out, however, one can only believe in the existence of such silence if one erases from one's consciousness much of the Basque literature written since the 1970s,

not only as a literary but also as a market phenomenon inspired many Spanish writers to use the formula at the core of Cercas's novel to write their own bestsellers about the war (López-Quiñones 97, Scharm 274-5). According to a study of the genre conducted by David Becerra Mayor, the first decade of the twenty-first century saw an explosion in Civil War novels which peaked around 2010 yet still continued to have a significant presence after that (421-2).

⁴ Many novels that address the effects of the armed struggle between ETA and Spain's state apparatus have appeared in print throughout the past three decades. None of them, however, have enjoyed the kind of popularity that has been achieved by *Patria*. For instance, *Los peces de la amargura* (2006), Aramburu's collection of short stories that addresses ETA's violence was very well-received by readers and critics and was awarded Premio Vargas Llosa de Relatos and Premio Dulce Chacón. Juan Manuel Díaz de Guereñu has praised the collection for "the ethical valor of discussing the suffering of the victims of terrorism" ("Intimidad" 185). The success of *Patria*, however, has surpassed that of any of the preceding literary treatments of the conflict, including those by Aramburu himself. *Patria's* success is, to a large degree, a result of a propitious historical moment when there is an increased appetite for literature that denigrates regional nationalisms within Spain as a result of events in Catalonia.

⁵ Iban Zaldúa has discussed at length the roots of Aramburu's oft-reiterated yet erroneous belief that Basque writers have been reluctant to acknowledge the suffering of the victims of ETA's violence in their writing (*Ese idioma* 71-7).

given that “this is one of the subjects that signaled the entrance into the contemporary era of literature in euskera” (“La literatura” n. pag.).

The success of *Patria* prompted HBO España to commission Aitor Gabilondo, a well-known television producer from San Sebastián, to adapt the novel for what will be the first original TV series within the recently launched streaming service of Spain’s standalone HBO channel (“‘Patria’, la novela” n. pag.). The production strategy adopted by HBO España is to “deliver limited, high-selective and unique content, the best of which may turn out to be iconic to its brand” (Hopewell n.pag.). HBO’s success is predicated on the network’s “incorporation of disaffection and even dissent into capitalism itself” (McGuigan 16), and the network has made a name for itself – and gained a significant market share – by creating seemingly risqué shows that absorb “ostensibly rebellious or non-conformist sentiments” that inevitably arise in late-capitalist societies (McGuigan 35). The choice of *Patria* for HBO’s first original series produced in Spain makes every sense given Aramburu’s skill at treating such a controversial subject in a manner that privileges sentimentality over insight. In the words of José Luis Bernal Salgado, *Patria* “manages to transmit emotions to the readers in torrents” and its short chapters “skillfully syncopate the process of reading in a sort of a panting that keeps getting faster” (120). The breathless quality of Aramburu’s writing in the novel underscores the vision of the Basque nationalist aspirations as a product of inarticulate emoting on the part of people who simply do not have much to say.

In an enthusiastic report about *Patria*’s success among Basque readers, journalist Lorena Maldonado quoted the representative of the bookstore Elkar Bilbao who believes that the novel has met with such great demand because its way of talking about the legacy of ETA “has not bothered anybody” (Maldonado, n. pag.). In order to achieve this, the novel eschews the larger political and social issues that played a role in the rise of the violent forms of Basque nationalism. Instead, Aramburu presents the conflict that ravaged Euskadi for four decades as a result of personal failings of individual participants who do not manage to keep their unthinking emotional responses under control. Once again, there is a clear parallel between Aramburu’s *Patria* and Cercas’s *Soldados de Salamina*. In the words of Nathan Richardson, “what the mass reading public consumed when they read and praised *Soldados de Salamina* was no deep exploration of Spanish history... Rather, they consumed a fiction about fiction, about heroes who thought nothing and who recognized in each other an ultimate nothingness and so who spent sleepless nights saying nothing” (12). The “ultimate nothingness” behind the characters’ incapacity to articulate an ideological dimension to the Civil War that is central to *Soldados* is even more pronounced in the case of *Patria*. The reason why the protagonists’ silent reconciliation in the closing scene of Aramburu’s novel seems unconvincing even to such an enthusiastic reader as Mario Vargas Llosa is that, in the absence of a discussion of the reasons that caused the conflict, Miren’s and Bittori’s embrace

is more likely to be a product of a fleeting mood than of a genuine progress.⁶ Given that Bittori is dying of cancer, it is likely that the former best friends will never have an opportunity to put into words their feelings about the violence that they experienced and that destroyed their friendship.

The numerous reviews of *Patria* in the Spanish press have, with very few exceptions, been couched in terms of superlative praise that seems to owe at least as much to the political uses the novel can serve as to its literary merit. Borja Hermoso, the director of the Culture section of *El País*, for instance, was unsparing in his admiration of *Patria* in a review of the novel: “One struggles to find hyperbolic adjectives and adverbs to describe what happened with *Patria*. . . But *Patria* is already something different, something greater than a book” (n. pag.) José-Carlos Mainer went as far as to compare Aramburu with Galdós and Tolstoi and suggested that the novel’s subject is “40 years of Euskadi’s drift towards fascism” (n. pag.). Mainer’s reaction demonstrates that *Patria* easily lends itself to be used as part of a narrative that dismisses Basque nationalism as fascist in nature and, thus, beyond deserving of a more nuanced approach. Fernando Valls echoes Mainer in his admiration of the novel by placing it among the ranks of novels by “Tolstoi, Galdós, Baroja, Max Aub, Ramiro Pinilla or Rafael Chirbes” (239). Such obvious efforts to canonize *Patria* almost immediately after its publication point to the reviewers’ desire to preclude any criticism of the novel by placing it among the ranks of works by Tolstoy and Galdós.

In a rare negative review of the novel titled “‘Patria’, a divergent opinion,” Pau Luque Sánchez points out that much of the book’s success owes to the facile binary that lies at its core and that cannot fail to please those of its readers who are averse to considering the possibility that Basque separatism can be rooted in anything but irrational fanaticism: “If Aramburu’s goal with *Patria* was to create a saga that would soothe our consciences, confirming that they are the bad guys, the fanatics, and the country bumpkins and we are the good guys (a little cowardly, but still ultimately good), *Patria* works—and I say this without any sarcasm—perfectly” (n. pag.). Not only does Aramburu’s approach constitute a gross simplification of Basque politics, it is also similar to the one that, for decades, nourished the very conflict that *Patria* attempts to condemn. As Cameron Watson points out, “this type of discourse—ETA as threat, society as victim—is the very life and soul of the organization” because it is feeding into “ETA’s self-mythification” (107). The violent militancy of ETA’s members in the novel is

⁶ In his review of the novel, Vargas Llosa expressed no reservations about *Patria*, save for the closing scene which he found to be unrealistic: “In the closing page, two former friends, Miren, a terrorist’s mother, and Bittori, a victim’s mother, exchange a hug of reconciliation. This is the only episode of this beautiful novel that didn’t feel like life itself but, rather, as pure fiction” (“El país” n. pag.). The incongruity of this happy ending with the logic of the events described in *Patria* contributes to the sentimentalized aspect of the novel. Vargas Llosa betrays this facet of the novel through the slip of referring to Bittori as a victim’s mother. Bittori loses a husband, and not a child, to ETA’s terrorism, but *Patria*’s tendency to simplify the most complex issues does suggest a facile parallelism of the kind Vargas Llosa stumbles into by mistake.

immune to logic or reason and exists as a force of nature that cannot be addressed by political measures or intellectual discourse. An unquestioning acceptance of this discourse leaves no space for an engagement with the abundant non-violent manifestations of Basque nationalism.

Patria's publication coincided with the exacerbation of the tensions between Spanish centralism and Catalanian nationalism. The novel's clearly critical stance towards "the blasted nationalism" (Vargas Llosa, "El país" n. pag.) will undoubtedly please those who welcome an unqualified rejection of Spain's separatist movements. Of course, the nationalism thus condemned is never that of the hegemonic Castilian-speaking Spain. As Michael Billig pointed out, "those in established nations – at the centre of things – are led to see nationalism as the property of others, not of 'us'" (5). The novel's failure to offer any insights into Basque separatism stems from its silence on the subject of the hegemonic nationalism of the Spanish state against which this separatism struggles. *Patria* legitimizes the dominant Castilian-speaking nationalism precisely by pretending that it does not exist. This kind of silence is the strongest weapon in the arsenal of hegemonic nationalisms:

The gaps in language, which enable banal nationalism to be forgotten, are also gaps in theoretical discourse. The social sciences have used habits of thinking which enable 'our' nationalism to pass by unnoticed. This, the mundane ways of thinking, which routinely lead 'us' to think that 'others', but not 'ourselves', are nationalist, are paralleled by habits of intellectual thinking. (Billig 8-9)

The novel's readers can absolve themselves of any complicity with nationalism through a facile condemnation of the irrational, cognitively limited characters who embody the entirety of Basque separatism in *Patria*. There is no hint in the novel that the violent manifestations of Basque nationalism could have occurred, at least to a degree, as a response to the aggressive efforts of the Spanish state to suppress the Basque language and culture. This is not surprising, given that Aramburu clearly believes in the inferiority of most, if not all, cultural output in euskera.

On the few occasions when *Patria* does offer a glimpse into the existence of a violent state-sponsored nationalism in Spain, the context of these observations makes them entirely unconvincing. Miren, for instance, refers to the victimization her family experienced at the hands of the repressive Spanish state apparatus in a way that makes it impossible for readers to see her suffering as genuine and empathize with her. When Miren realizes that Bittori has come back to their village after a long absence, she is incensed by what she perceives as her former friend's attempt to make her accept culpability for Bittori's suffering: "We are victimized by the State and now we are also victimized by the victims. Everybody is against us" (79). Given that Bittori's husband was killed by the terrorist cell headed by Miren's own

son, Miren's insistence on seeing herself as Bittori's victim is so outrageous that there is no likelihood of readers experiencing any compassion towards a character capable of such tone-deafness. Like most of the Basque characters in the novel, Miren is a parody of Basqueness that seems to be inspired by the Orientalizing accounts of Basque difference like the one provided by Ian Gibson in his *Fire in the Blood*:

The Basques are a mystery race and their language is an enigma. . . When a Basque woman wears her hair plaited and dons moccasin sandals she looks as if she has come straight off the set of a Western. The Basque matron is an awesome figure. . . A Basque friend assures me that, while brother-sister incest occurs with some frequency in the lonely inland valleys, no father would ever dare to go to bed with his daughter – he would be instantly castrated by the woman of the house! (131-4)

In spite of their political differences, Miren and Bittori represent precisely the kind of domineering, emasculating womanhood that is often evoked in such risible stereotypes about Basques.

In his review of *Patria*, Luque Sánchez discusses the consequences of Aramburu's decision to sacrifice nuance to the goal of creating an easily digestible formula at the core of the novel: "In *Patria*, the bad guys are ignorant, provincial and I'd even venture to say that they have a noticeable cognitive impairment. At no point throughout the reading do I get a feeling that their badness and barbarity stem from their ideology but, rather, from their mental limitations. That is, they are barbaric because they are dumb" (n. pag.). Amidst the exuberant praise that *Patria* has received, it is refreshing to see a review that points to one of the novel's most puzzling aspects. Most of its characters do seem cognitively impaired, although this affliction does not only strike those of them who belong to or support ETA. The Basque characters victimized by ETA suffer from the same defect and seem to exist in an emotional vacuum, which prevents them from forming and maintaining the most basic human links.

One of the most salient examples of this cognitive limitation can be observed in Miren's comportment when her daughter Arantxa suffers a stroke. In the presence of Arantxa, who is lying in her hospital bed, Miren attacks her daughter's estranged husband Guillermo, using the kind of language that demonstrates her utter incapacity to comprehend the impact that her words might have on the ailing and helpless Arantxa. Guillermo's response to Miren's outburst offers the readers a glimpse into the casual cruelty she practices with her infirm daughter: "My definitive separation from Arantxa has nothing to do with what happened. . . So it's not true that I just split and saddled you with this 'lump.' Try showing a little respect. If not for me, then at least for your daughter whom I'd never call a lump like you just did" (97). Guillermo, who is not Basque, is capable of treating his ailing estranged wife with a degree of kindness that is entirely absent from the emotional repertoire of Arantxa's Basque

mother. This is not accidental, given that Aramburu consistently endows the Basque characters of *Patria* with an inherent incapacity to empathize with others.

The contrast between the kindness with which one of the nurses – who, not surprisingly, is not Basque – relates to Arantxa’s teenage daughter Ainhoa and the harshness of Miren’s treatment of her granddaughter is especially striking: “A nurse, Carme, very sweet, took care of Ainhoa in the first days, until the arrival of Miren. She told her soothingly and caringly to stop worrying, that she would help her” (91). Miren, on the other hand, is incapable of relating to the pain and fear that her granddaughter experiences as a result of Arantxa’s sudden illness and keeps complaining about the expense of having to take care of Ainhoa while her mother is sick: “Understand that this whole thing with your mother will cost me a ton of money. I have to be careful with what I spend” (92), “on the way, Miren. . . kept listing all of her expenses. . . Miren kept talking and complaining and never stopped complaining, while Ainhoa, feeling resentful, looked anywhere else, at other bus passengers, houses and passersby, to avoid looking at her grandmother, refusing to say a word to her” (94). Ainhoa’s silence is a result of Miren’s incapacity to empathize with the suffering experienced by her teenaged granddaughter who is forced to face her mother’s sudden illness. Like other members of Miren’s family, Ainhoa learns that silence is the best response to Miren’s emotional destructiveness.

Miren is ETA’s most passionate supporter among the characters of the novel. Her fanatical defense of ETA’s actions is greater than even that of her son Joxe Mari who is jailed for his terrorist activity on behalf of the organization. However, Miren’s erstwhile friend Bittori, who detests ETA as much as Miren supports it, exhibits the same unthinking cruelty towards her husband and children as Miren. Her obsession with food is equal to Miren’s and corresponds to the stereotype of gastronomically preoccupied Basques.⁷ Bittori’s scandalized reaction to the realization that her son’s girlfriend Aránzazu is a vegetarian would be comical if the readers did not know that Aránzazu’s relationship with Xabier was not going to survive his complex familial allegiances: “Can you imagine our son living with this kind of person? For God’s sake! In this house, we have eaten meat and fish our whole lives. And besides, these grass-eaters are weird people, filled with hang-ups. . . A divorcée, sharp as a needle. This woman is used goods that’s been passed around forever. She eats like a little birdie. She didn’t even touch the sponge cake” (292). Bittori’s contempt for Aránzazu’s

⁷ Gibson, for instance, states that “heartly eaters and deep drinkers, they have some of the best cooking in the land. There is no hake like Basque hake, and their vegetables, apples and cheeses are in a class of their own” (133). Miren’s fanatical dedication to cooking fish, as well as her husband’s passionate love for his vegetable patch, are presented in the novel as being as symptomatic of their Basqueness as their almost comical gruffness.

status as a divorcée stems from her equally stereotypical Catholic piety, which marks her as ‘a typical Basque’ as much as her love of food does.⁸

Bittori’s son Xabier is conscious of his mother’s cognitive impoverishment and refers to her as “a person with a fairly limited mental universe” (363). The opinion he has of his mother might sound harsh yet it is impossible to reach a different conclusion after observing Bittori’s interactions with her adult children. The manner in which Bittori communicates to her son the news that Txato has been shot cannot fail to wound Xabier, yet Bittori is oblivious to the pain she is causing: “He’s dead. Start getting used to it. – Who told you this? – I just know it. Last I saw him, he was still breathing; but he was dying. I assure you that he won’t survive this one. I think his head was blown up. Txato is over and done, just wait and see. – I suppose he was taken to a hospital. – Yes, but it’s useless, just wait and see” (370). The casual attitude that both Miren and Bittori exhibit at the time when members of their families find themselves on the brink of death is in keeping with the vision of Basque identity that lies at the core of the novel. A culture whose members are this indifferent to the suffering and possible death of their loved ones, the novel seems to suggest, can hardly be expected to be repulsed by terrorism.

Aramburu makes every effort to ensure that readers see his characters as typical and not in any way exceptional. As Martínez Arrizabalaga pointed out, the novel is set “in a village close to San Sebastián that isn’t clearly defined, with the intention of making it alike many other villages of Euskal Herría” (494). In spite of their contrasting attitudes towards ETA, Miren and Bittori are nearly identical in the manner in which they conduct their lives and relate to others. The similarities between these women have led critics to conclude that the novel’s greatest defect is the excessively monochromatic nature of its protagonists (Brindisi n. pag.). This narrative strategy, however, does not stem from any artistic limitations on the part of the novel’s author who has never found it hard to create a wide variety of complex and nuanced characters in his novels and short stories.⁹ The writer’s reliance on stereotypical characters can only lead the novel’s readers to conclude that the cognitive difficulties and the incapacity to experience empathy that characterize the Basque characters of *Patria* are common to most Basques. As Vargas Llosa pointed out in his review of *Patria*, the novel’s

⁸ The truly maleficent presence in the novel is embodied by the characters of the village priest don Serapio and the bartender Patxi who, in the words of Fernando Valls, are “painted with Barojan tinges [and] compete in manipulation and malevolence” (234). Bittori’s abandonment of the Catholic faith is linked in the novel to her rejection of Basque nationalism after her husband’s assassination by ETA. *Patria* ridicules and demonizes the traditional forms of Basque sociability that include church attendance, local bars, gastronomic societies, and cycling clubs as breeding grounds for separatist sentiment.

⁹ In his study of Aramburu’s work published before 2005, for instance, Díaz de Guereñu points out that, from the beginning of his novelistic career, Aramburu created a narrative cast comprised of highly defined characters with their own ways of speaking and acting that make them instantly recognizable yet never leave the readers feeling jaded (369).

characters “are neither heroes nor great evildoers but regular folks, some of them poor devils who wouldn’t be of any interest in different circumstances” (n. pag.). The review is titled “The Land of the Silent,” which seems to suggest that the Peruvian novelist, at least, does believe that *Patria* speaks to the Basque experience at large and not only to that of a few isolated ‘poor devils.’ The sheer unexceptionality of Miren, Bittori and their family members suggests that there is something indigenous to the Basque culture, as it is portrayed in the novel, that is bound to cause outbursts of inexplicable and uncontrolled violence.¹⁰

In his review of *Patria*, Díaz de Guereñu quotes a promotional text written by Aramburu that was meant to accompany the novel and explain the idea behind it. In the writer’s own words, the characters of *Patria* represent all Basques: “If I had to summarize in a few words the central theme of *Patria*, I wouldn’t hesitate to mention the people of my land. The novel talks, first and foremost, about them even if they are represented by a handful of characters who also had to live through the bloody and sad era of the Basque Country” (Díaz de Guereñu, “Un agujero” 108). It is hardly accidental that readers never learn the last names of the characters who populate the novel and, as a result, can associate them “with nobody and anybody” in Euskadi (Díaz de Guereñu, “Un agujero” 110). Due to the editorial success of *Patria*, Aramburu, who for the past thirty years has lived in Germany, is now the author of the most widely read text about the Basque Country. The novel has been translated into 16 languages and for many of the novel’s overseas readers will constitute their only source of information on Euskadi. In a recent interview, the author has made it clear that he is aware of the paucity of knowledge many of his readers probably have about the Basque Country and is not concerned about it. To the contrary, Aramburu suggests that the supposed universality of the Basque experience makes it unnecessary for the novel’s readers to have any knowledge of the historical and political context of the events he describes in the novel (Uribarri n. pag.). Aramburu’s appeals to the supposed universality of the Basque experience stem from the same source as his continued efforts to deny the value of the works of art that Euskadi has produced. By refusing to acknowledge the value of cultural production in Euskera, the writer endorses the belief that Basque nationalist aspirations cannot possibly arise out of a genuine need to preserve a truly valuable cultural legacy.

Aramburu’s insistence that Basque literature has failed to address the violent legacy of ETA’s terrorism (Zaldua 76) is not grounded in reality, yet it is very much in keeping with the author’s generally poor opinion of writers who have not abandoned euskera in favor of Castilian Spanish. Aramburu believes that such writers lack artistic freedom because some of them receive financial support from the government of the Basque Autonomous Community. As the author said in a 2011 interview, “in the Basque Country, a fiction is

¹⁰ This vision of Basques is not new. Lisa Corostegui, for instance, provides an insightful analysis of the many ways in which Basques have been Orientalized through a discourse that associates them with uncontrollable eruptions of violence (36-7).

maintained of there being readers who read in euskera and, as a result, official support is necessary” (qtd. in Zaldúa 76). This is not an isolated statement on Aramburu’s part but, rather, a position that the author has defended consistently and unwaveringly. In 2016, Aramburu confronted a leading Basque writer Ramon Saizarbitoria during the literary encounters organized as part of the “(Im)possible conversations in Donostia” at the Lagun bookstore in San Sebastián: “‘An euskaldun writer is favored’, [Aramburu] reiterated before citing as an example the program of ‘readings in ikastolas’ and the prize of 400 euros that, in his opinion, is endangered if a writer expresses ‘dissidence.’ ‘I can express myself with total freedom and not endanger my chances of getting published’” (Moyano n. pag.). By promoting the idea that Basque writers have not been able to write about ETA with complete freedom because they owe their financial well-being to nationalist forces, Aramburu suggests that readers can only find honest discussions of Basque separatism in books written in *castellano*.

If we are to reject the essentialist vision of Miren’s and Bittori’s limited emotional repertoire as stemming from their being Basque, there is another explanation for their behavior. In the words of clinical psychologist Enrique Echeburúa, victims of violent trauma often experience “emotional anesthesia” that is manifested in “problems of emotional expression [and] affective stunting [that] complicates expressions of tenderness and creates an obstacle for the pursuit of close relationships” (54-5). As a result of the ruptured emotional connections that the psyche employs to protect itself from realizing the full consequences of the trauma and reliving it, victims of trauma become isolated within their families and communities (Echeburúa 56). The description of the emotional response that the Basque psychologist provides of the victims of violent trauma corresponds perfectly with the protagonists of Aramburu’s novel.

The difficulty of communicating with their family members and the sullenness of their comportment that undermines their relationships with their husbands, children, and friends predate the encounter with ETA’s violence in Miren’s and Bittori’s lives. In a conversation with her surly mother, Miren’s daughter Arantxa unsuccessfully attempts to break the silence that has always been part of their family life: “- *Ama*, you know what this family’s problem is? That we have always talked very little to each other. – Bah. – I think we don’t know each other. – Well, I know all of you. I know you all too well” (44). When Arantxa loses her capacity to speak as a result of a stroke, her complete silence underscores the multitude of ways in which the members of her family have failed to communicate with each other (76). Arantxa’s difficulty to speak is a result of her illness, yet it is surprisingly similar to the incapacity of articulating words that afflicts her family members and neighbors.

The eruption of ETA’s violence into the lives of the inhabitants of the village where the novel’s characters reside forces them to take refuge in the already familiar practice of silence. When Txato’s neighbors realize that he is being targeted by ETA, they immediately erase him

from their conversations: “Txato was enterprising and brave. Everybody in the village said so until overnight, Txato entzun pim pam pum, they stopped mentioning him in their conversations as if he never existed” (59). When ETA begins to terrorize Txato, he finds himself incapable of discussing with his wife the extortion attempts and the threats to which he is subjected. Txato fails to leave his village, an act which might have saved his life, because of a lack of communication with his wife. As their son Xabier points out, Txato and Bittori fail to discuss the possibility of leaving the village where Txato’s life is at risk because even the terrorist threats fail to disrupt the pattern of gruff silence that always characterized their relationship: “*Ama* would leave, too. She hinted she would a few times. I heard her says so. What happens is that the two of you don’t communicate” (219).

Txato’s response to Xabier’s observation that existing in silent isolation is putting his life at risk offers a glimpse into the nature of the historical trauma that resulted in the emotionally stunted behavior of Txato’s generation of Basques: “– This is no life. – It’s what there is. It could be worse. My father fought in the war against Franco. His leg was destroyed and he spent three years in jail” (220). The devastation visited by the Nationalist forces on Euskadi during the Civil War and the persecution of Basques in the post-war years created a culture of silence that has impacted the Basque characters in the novel and tainted even the closest interpersonal relationships in their lives. Txato’s comment is one of the very few allusions to the trauma of the Civil War and of the violent Castilian nationalism that saw the Basque culture as one of its main enemies. The legacy of Francoist persecution of Basques is not explored in the novel. As Nicolas Buckley points out:

in order to truly explore the perspective of the Basque radical community, it would be necessary to consider the long historical context of the Basque conflict, beyond the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the role of the Spanish state in its oppression as a cause to its radicalism and terrorist acts. ETA, which grew up in the heat of an industrialization process and during the emergence of a new Spanish working class in the 1960s, cannot be analysed without focusing on the last period of the Francoist dictatorship. Subsequently the Basque radical community (ETA’s social base) experienced in the Basque territories during the 1970s the most violent transition to democracy in comparison with the rest of Spanish provinces. (112-3)

This is precisely the kind of background that is completely absent in *Patria*, which allows Aramburu to engage in a facile condemnation of etarras outside of the wider context of the Basque reaction to the violent imposition of Castilian nationalism both before and during the Transition to democracy in Spain.

In spite of the fact that ETA was born in response to the Franco dictatorship’s attempts to stamp out any vestiges of the Basque culture, Aramburu makes it clear that the etarras he

depicts in the novel have no understanding of the ideological history of their organization: “Joxe Mari, a chilling character, a brawny, uncultured guy who’s a bit of an animal, becomes a terrorist not for any ideological reason —his understanding of politics is limited to believing that Spain exploits Euskal Herria and nothing but armed struggle will bring independence— but for love of risk and a confused fascination with violence” (Vargas Llosa n. pag.). The ETA portrayed in *Patria* exists as a manifestation of uncontrolled murderous instincts that its members seem to develop for no reason other than a natural affinity for violence.

The structure of the novel allows Aramburu to obscure the ways in which this vision of Basqueness is reflective not of any sort of reality but of the author’s own ideological investment into the narrative of Castilian nationalism: “A more or less disorganized string of testimonials of *Patria*’s characters allows to obscure the authorial agency that organizes the narrative. This is a narrative mechanism that allows to maintain an illusion of reality for the readers” (Martínez Arrizabalaga 493). This permits Aramburu to introduce the figure of a writer who can impose his point of view on these silent characters. The nameless writer is clearly Aramburu’s *alter ego* since he expresses many of the ideas that the writer has shared throughout his interviews and presents himself as the author of a definitive novel that concentrates on the suffering of ETA’s victims, which Aramburu has always insisted was the goal of *Patria*. This allows Aramburu to occupy a “superior position as the hero who has the power to write the Basque identity. . . The Basques, then, are relegated to the status of intellectual children who need the paternalistic foreigner to write for them” (Corcostegui 40). Aramburu’s intellectual authority in the novel stems from his supposed freedom from nationalist impulses, which the writer presents as primitive. We need to remember, however, that an insistence on one’s positioning outside of a nationalist discourse can be indicative of a desire to promote one’s own hegemonic version of nationalism: “It is a pretty safe bet that criticism of other people’s nationalism, in the name of our own capacity to transcend it or the idea that we have already moved beyond it, is only another figure of nationalism. Once again we can see an illustration of the essentially *projective* character, as the psychoanalysts say, of nationalist ideology” (Balibar 15). *Patria* contributes to the advancement of the goals of Castilian nationalism by presenting it as benign in comparison with the supposedly violent nature of Basque nationalist sentiments.

On May 3, 2018 ETA formally announced its definitive dissolution in a short 378-word statement titled “ETA’s Final Declaration to the Basque People.” Unlike the ETA members depicted by Aramburu, the *etarras* who signed the statement made it clear that they are fully conscious of the origins of their organization in the post-war era characterized by extreme repression unleashed by the Spanish state on the Basque culture. The dissolution of ETA sets the stage for the discussions of the organization’s legacy that, unlike *Patria*, will not be based on “a series of recognizable narrative tropes [that] place state-aligned post-ETA cultural

products in line with the narratives of consensus promoted since the Transition period, which privileged sentimental and ahistorical treatments of ETA” (Miguélez-Carballeira 167). The tensions between the hegemonic nationalism and the non-Castilian nationalisms of the Iberian Peninsula cannot be erased out of existence by drawing a veil of silence over them. The editorial success of Aramburu’s novel demonstrates that this subject is of an enormous interest to readers and that a lot of work remains to be done in addressing the legacy of all manifestations of the different versions of violent nationalism in Spain.

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