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## Amaia Salazar: Modern Detective, Fairy Tale Heroine, Ancestral Basque Woman

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Amaia Salazar – modern detective, fairy tale heroine, ancestral Basque woman.

Amaia Salazar is the main character of Dolores Redondo's<sup>1</sup> novels that form a Baztán trilogy - *El guardián invisible*, 2012 (The Invisible Guardian), *Legado en los huesos*, 2013 (The Legacy of the Bones), *Ofrenda a la tormenta*, 2014 (Offering to the Storm). The novels are hybrid texts that weave in the detective story elements of Basque mythology, fairy tales, and the noir. It is in the character of the detective Amaia Salazar that all these elements converge. For many years male detectives have dominated Spanish (and Basque) crime novels while women have only played the role of victims or instigators. In Basque literature it was Itxaro Borda who created an interesting character of a female detective in her 1994 novel *Bakean utzi arte* (Until they live us in peace). Her Amaia Ezpeldoi is the first homosexual detective character of Basque literature. Nowadays more and more female characters become main protagonists, playing the role of unforgettable detectives.

Such a detective is Redondo's Amaia Salazar. She is a bright Navarrese police detective. Even though she does make mistakes sometimes, at the end she always solves the crime. Amaia is a skilled detective. Trained with FBI, she knows how to take advantage of the most recent advances in forensic science. However, her investigations are often entwined with her own family drama. She grew up in a small town of Elizondo in the Baztán Valley and now lives in Pamplona with her husband, a well-known American sculpturer. She is called back to investigate the murders committed in her hometown. She has a very traumatic past: rejected by her mother who tried to murder her when Amaia was a child. When Amaia comes back to

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<sup>1</sup> Dolores Redondo (Donostia, 1969) is a winner of the 2016 Premio Planeta literary award. In 2018 she received one of the annual Sabino Arana Foundation prizes. The books of her Baztán trilogy were translated into forty languages. All three were adapted to the cinema and Ernest Sala created his graphic novels based on the trilogy.

Elizondo to investigate the series of crimes, she must also face her own fears and her unsurpassed childhood traumas. She is strong with the determination to always move forward, but she is also very fragile tormented by her nightmares. Amaia Salazar is, in the words of Redondo, a homage to all the women in her life.<sup>2</sup>

The first case she investigates is that of a serial killer who murders teenage girls in a ritualistic manner. In the second novel she investigates the mysterious suicides and notes left behind containing only one word “Tarttalo.”<sup>3</sup> The plot of the third novel involves a discovery of bodies of babies sacrificed by a local cult group. There is a connection between the crimes in all three novels and as the investigation progresses Amaia is forced to investigate the past of her own family and to face her own traumas and nightmares.

She is a professional investigator, so she finds a rational explanation for everything that is happening in the novels. Yet there are parts of her investigation that escape this logic like the seeing of basajaun and Mari.<sup>4</sup> The novels convey the feelings of tension and uncertainty. The intangible presence of evil can be felt in all three stories. Although each time the origin of the mysterious deaths finds the rational explanation, the way the story is narrated makes the readers doubt in this rationality. Confronting the origins of her recurring nightmares, Amaia reveals the darkest secrets of the Baztán valley. In all three novels she ends up investigating her own family, people who themselves become either suspects or criminals.

Like a fairy tale protagonist, Amaia follows the trail of breadcrumbs, the clues that lead her to the solution of the crime. This is one of many instances in the trilogy when the fairytale

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<sup>2</sup> Un homenaje a todas las mujeres de mi vida. Entrevista a Imanol Arias, Marta Etura y Dolores Redondo en ‘La Ventana’ 25-11-2019. <https://www.youtube.com/live/niDWLDgAps?feature=share>

<sup>3</sup> Tarttalo is Basque evil cyclops

<sup>4</sup> Basajaun is the mythological lord of the woods, protector of the forest and Mari is the main goddess in Basque mythology, epiphany of Mother Earth

motifs overlap intertextually with the crime novel.<sup>5</sup> The breadcrumbs are the local pastries, *txantxigorri*, placed on the murdered girls' bodies and they lead Amaia not only to the solution of the crime but also to her own past traumas and to her own family circle.

Borham-Putyal points to other fairy tale elements that Redondo rewrites in her novels,<sup>6</sup> elements such as the breadcrumb trail – *txantxigorri*; the cannibalistic witch – Amaia's mother who every night tells little Amaia to sleep calmly because her mother will not eat her up just yet;<sup>7</sup> the three sisters – Flora, Rosaura, Amaia; the fairy godmother – Engrasi. Amaia's aunt Engrasi is like a surrogate mother to her. Engrasi's house, where Amaia moved after her mother tried to kill her, offers protection and safety. Just like in a fairy tale, in Redondo's trilogy, Amaia sets on a quest: she is a skilled detective who searches and solves the crime. On the way, she encounters the evil figure, judge Markina who tries to confuse her in her quest and seduces her, but in the end, she succeeds in defeating him.<sup>8</sup> As Borham-Putyal points out, Dolores Redondo gives a tribute to the real-life sacrifice of a baby girl<sup>9</sup> and creates a tale for her “in which the heroine fulfils her quest and the victim is vindicated. (...) the *female* hunter finally kills the wolf.”<sup>10</sup> The female hunter refers, of course, to the detective Amaia Salazar and the wolf to Markina, a mastermind behind all the crimes committed in the novels.

The setting, the eerie hostile scenery of the Baztán valley with the river running through it, determines the plot configuration. Redondo explained it in one of the interviews: “the setting

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<sup>5</sup> Miriam Borham-Putyal explores the novels of the Baztán trilogy's generic hybridity: they contain elements of both a detective novel and a fairy tale.

Miriam Borham-Putyal, *Red Shoes, Witches and Creatures of the Forest: Dolores Redondo's Baztán Trilogy as Contemporary Fairy Tale*, in: *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic: Subverting Gender and Genre*. Lydia Brogué and Auba Llompart eds. Boston: Brill 2020.

<sup>6</sup> pp 169-178

<sup>7</sup> No tengas miedo de la *ama*, pequeña zorra. No voy a comerte. Dolores Redondo, *El guardián invisible*, Barcelona: Ediciones Destino 2013, p. 262

<sup>8</sup> Borham-Putyal p. 175

<sup>9</sup> Dolores Redondo was inspired by a real-life murder of a baby girl.

<sup>10</sup> Borham-Putyal p. 177

has a great influence on the behavior and the way of life of the characters and that is because I am not looking for postcard beauty, but rather the extra beauty of landscapes that are highly demanding. Human settlements in hostile places have always caught my attention on an anthropological level, and both Ribera Sacra and Baztán are places of great spiritual power.”<sup>11</sup>

The forest is described as a bewitching space, serene with ancient beauty that evokes in Amaia the most human, ethereal, and childish part of her soul that believes in wonderful fairies with duck feet.<sup>12</sup> Each novel of the trilogy refers to Basque mythological creatures: basajaun, the mother goddess Mari, the evil cyclops Tarttalo, lamias, and the demon Inguma.<sup>13</sup> Basque mythology permeates the landscape: those fairies with duck feet are Basque lamias, beautiful longhaired nymphs living around rivers. For the inhabitants of the Baztán valley, Basque myths are alive and affect the way people think. The existence of some mythological beings is confirmed by different characters in the novel like Flores whose wounds were dressed and whose life was saved, supposedly, by basajaun. Even Amaia’s own aunt Engrasi described her encounters with basajaun in the forest. The Baztán forest is Foucault’s heterotopia which has “the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible.”<sup>14</sup> The Baztán forest is a place where the supernatural, the magic, and the evil, the criminal take place. The forest is a magical space, beautiful, grandiose yet terrifying

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<sup>11</sup> Es cierto que el escenario llega a tener gran influencia sobre el comportamiento y modo de vida de los personajes y eso es porque no busco una belleza de postal, sino la belleza extra de los personajes que tienen una gran exigencia. Siempre me han llamado la atención a nivel antropológico los asentamientos humanos en lugares hostiles y tanto Ribeira Santa como Baztán son lugares de gran potencia espiritual.

“Me gusta hablar del mal como entidad” Noemi Iruzbieta, March 23, 2017

<http://www.larioja.com/culturas/201703/23/gusta-hablar-como-entidad-20170323003205-v.html>

<sup>12</sup> El bosque en el Baztán es hechizante, con una belleza serena y ancestral que evoca sin buscarlo su parte más humana, la parte más etérea e infantil, esa que cree en las maravillosas hadas con pies de pato que vivían en el bosque, Dolores Redondo, *El guardián invisible*, Barcelona: Ediciones Destino 2013, p. 88

<sup>13</sup> Inguma is an evil demon who suffocates people in their sleep.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, Of other spaces, in: M. Dehaene and L. de Caeter (Eds.), *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2008, p. 19.

and hostile. The forest makes Amaia feel a secret pride of belonging, but its grandeur also causes fear and vertigo.<sup>15</sup> It is a sublime space that fascinates and scares her at the same time, a space where everyday reality of the local inhabitants and that of the Basque mythical creatures overlap.

Amaia becomes a link between those two worlds. She is the only character that has access to the mythological world. Basajaun is the Lord of the Woods, protector of the forest, and of nature. The murders disturb this natural world and that forces him to show himself to Amaia. She is the one who must solve the crimes and restore the natural order. The basajaun shows himself to her not by accident but because he wants to be seen.<sup>16</sup> Amaia not only has a glimpse of basajaun, but also she meets and talks with Mari, and the lamias torment her in her nightmares demanding that she cleans the river, washes the offense.<sup>17</sup> She asks and receives help from them: Mari gives her a desired child, at the same time making sure it is a boy, and thus saving his life. When Amaia's mother kidnaps the child, it is his sex that saves him from being sacrificed. Only baby girls were sacrificed. Mari appears in the novel on few occasions and her characteristics are described as those of every woman. Daniela Kluger<sup>18</sup> notices a striking parallelism between Mari and Amaia Salazar in emphasis on such qualities as motherhood, access to the mythological sphere, the connection with nature, and the spirit of a fighter. Mari is the mother goddess so when at the end of the novel Amaia discovers a tomb with corpses of babies, Mari arrives in a furious storm of rain and thunder. Not only does Amaia feel as if she were hearing the chant of the lamias accompanying Mari, but the readers seem to hear it too. All the murders of teenage

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<sup>15</sup> El bosque siempre le producía un secreto orgullo de pertenencia, aunque su grandiosidad también le provocaba temor y vértigo. *El guardián invisible*, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Yo no lo vi de forma accidental, (...) lo vi porque él guiso que lo viera. *Ofrenda a la tormenta*, Barcelona: Ediciones Destino 2014, p. 283

<sup>17</sup> Limpia el río – dijeron. Lava la ofensa – exigieron, Dolores Redondo, *Ofrenda a la tormenta*, p. 253

<sup>18</sup> Daniela Kluger, "Mito y mujer. El redescubrimiento literario de la mitología vasca," Euskonews 770, 2022-03-16. <https://www.euskonews.eus/zbk/770/mito-y-mujer-el-redescubrimiento-literario-de-la-mitologia-vasca/ar-0770001003C/>

girls and the sacrifice of baby girls violate the natural order and make Amaia unstoppable in her fight for what she believes in. The real and fantastic coexist and the detective story intersects with the mythology. Amaia moves between these two worlds. She is attracted by the power of the forces of evil, but she overcomes them at the end. Through her characters, in her novels, Redondo explores the nature of evil, of the importance of family, of motherhood, of friendship, and of trust. The use of Basque mythology not only adds interest to the story, allows her to look deeper into all these topics, but also pays homage to the ancient Basque tales and beliefs. The generic hybridity of the novels adds tension and the eerie atmosphere to the stories.

Dolores Redondo makes an important contribution to detective fiction by infusing it with the elements of Basque mythology, fairy tales, and noir, and by creating a character of a female detective in which all these elements converge.