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Sketching Motherhood. Maternal Representation in Contemporary Picturebooks: The Case of Spain

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Abstract

Although gender-role stereotypes in children's literature have been widely explored, the study of the role of mothers and their representation in picturebooks has not received much attention from the academic world, especially as far as Spain is concerned. This paper analyses a sample of seven picturebooks published in Spain over the last 7 years -all by awarded authors and widely reviewed in some of the most popular Spanish blogs on Children's and Youth Literature (CYL)-and focused on the maternal figure. It aims to provide a panoramic view of the representations of the role of the mother as a paradigm of the changes seen in Spanish society, studying the representation of her voice, emotions, and ties to other members of her family through a systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis applied to picturebooks. The results reveal that, for the first time, the mother's voice and her right to explore her own feelings are included in her characterisation, and also, that her relationship with the rest of the family includes different aspects—children, society, work, partner, and self-care. In conclusion, the conception of motherhood as proposed to Spanish families through picturebooks seems to be finally changing,

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evolving from fixed stereotypes and allowing the expression of contradictory feelings related to maternity.

Introduction

In general terms, in children's picturebooks across the Western world, the figure of the mother has been analysed in isolation or, at most, in relation to or confronting the father figure (Dewitt et al., 2013). If families are conceived as systems, it is essential to examine the role of mothers in relation to the rest of the nuclear family. The birth of a first child has the potential to transform the mother's life orientation, values and the networks she has been building up to that time relating to family, work, and social spheres (Prinds et al., 2018), implying the need for a supportive and affective network during pregnancy and child-rearing (Lotero et al., 2018). As society's perception of the figure of the mother and her networks changes, there is a need for reconceptualising her individual and social identity and the burden attached to the mother's role.

In the case of Spain, until the end of Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), women's identity was strongly linked to the role of the mother in a very conventional way and this vision has persisted for several decades (Arkinstall, 2002). By the 1990s, Sau (1995) underlined the emptiness of an idea of motherhood reduced to its biological aspects, since this denies its human, economic, social, and political dimensions. In the last 20 years, heterodox motherhoods started emerging both in Spanish society (Martínez et al., 2011) and its children's literature (Lombardo, 2011). Nonetheless, persistent gender inequalities (Canzio, 2021) still reflect a heteronormative vision of family in picturebooks (Vintró, 2008).

Taking this into account, this research intends to provide an overview of the evolution of the role of the mother in Children's Youth Literature (CYL) in Spain, highlighting three main aspects of her character's representation in picturebooks: her feelings and affects, her voice, and her relationship with the rest of the nuclear family.

Context

Thanks to new social regulations that promote work-life balance and reduce social and economic pressures, as well as the availability of more egalitarian ways of parenting, the degree of women's satisfaction after becoming mothers has apparently increased (Preisner et al., 2020). Still, mothers often feel overburdened and penalized by the demands of combining work and family (Molina & Montuenga, 2009), making them experience ambivalent emotions caused by gender archetypes and expectations (Almond, 2011). The need to overcome this ambivalence could be considered as the origin of the modern archetype of 'wonder woman', an ideal from

the 1930s that represents female perfection, coping both with her job and her role at home as a caregiver. The social pressure generated by this archetype still lingers in the twenty-first century (Antoshchuk & Gewinner, 2020; Gill, 2016; Skorinko et al., 2020). Similarly, the paradigm of the self-sacrificing woman still features (Kaplan, 2013), even if it has updated towards a sort of motherhood mysticism in Spain and America (Hall, 2004) which can be very harmful in terms of physical and psychological wellbeing (Cantillon & Hutton, 2020).

In adult literature, it has been argued that motherhood itself was not given a leading role until the end of the twentieth century (Hansen, 1997; Podnieks & O'Reilly, 2010). However, mothers are frequently represented in CYL (Balça et al., 2020), and their representations involve major implications for early learners, as picturesbooks are normally their first contact with the literary world (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

The way mothers have recurrently been represented in CYL can be categorised into collective archetypes and imply the assumption of a series of gender stereotypes (Dickman & Murnen, 2004; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006). Consequently, until very recently (Coats, 2018; Moya-Guijarro & Cañamares-Torrijos, 2020), the classical paradigm of motherhood differentiated *good mothers'* (sweet, good, patient, and devoted to the point of sacrifice) from *stepmothers* (envious, mean, and cruel, see Birkhäuser-Oeri, 2016; Rowe, 1979).

Furthermore, when analysing mothers' representation in CYL, it is interesting to note that the described Manichaean representation always appears from the children's perspective (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006). The voice of the mother is rarely in the centre, and even in those cases in which occasional divergences appeared, they were given a space to highlight them as reprehensible or in need of hiding. Examples of this can be found in Spanish bestselling picturebooks like *Madrechillona* (Bauer, 2000), where a penguin mother tears her baby to pieces with a cry of rage, and *Secreto de familia* (Isol, 2003), where maternal imperfection is hidden behind closed doors. In these cases, the represented mother needs to restore her emotional balance after a crisis to return to the archetype of the *godmother*, as exemplified in other well-known picturebooks in Spain such as *Mi madre es rara* (Gilmore, 1991).

However, as society changes, so does the role of the mother, in real life and in CYL. With the feminist third wave and even more during the last decade, visions of the mother have been changing, thanks to spaces as heterogeneous as reality shows (Edwards, 2010), TV shows (Wallworth, 2018), or social networks (Hunt, 2009; Rottenberg, 2017). In the case of Spain, this new motherhood is voiced by associations, such as *El Club de las Malasmadres* (Baena, 2015) or the Asociación *Petra Maternidades Feministas,* among others, which from a personal revindication became political as they put pressure on the Spanish Government to implement conciliation policies (García, 2020). Even if these associations fight against the traditional vision of the mother in the Spanish imaginary, in Spanish popular television culture there still is a clear trend to associate women to a domestic context or to less ambitious professions, mostly motivated by a major presence linked to emotions or motherhood (Martínez-Rodrigo & Martínez-Cabeza, 2020). Whereas in the conception of women represented in fiction there have been some advances in the last years (Hidalgo-Marí, 2017), this is not the case in advertising, as the stereotypical framing

of womens' bodies is increasingly polarised, depending on whether or not they are mothers (Vega et al., 2019).

Within CYL, picturebooks represent an important source for children, both for their format and for their context. Firstly, their visual literacy potential (Horting, 1983) reinforces their literary value but at the same time turns them into aesthetic, artistic, educational and social products (Senís Fernández, 2014). Moreover, from a structural point of view, viewing texts and images together greatly impacts children's conceptualisation literacy process (Arizpe, Farrar, & McAdam, 2017). Specifically, in Spain, picturebooks are one of the best-selling genres, as their high-quality interests adult readers and has even turned them into collector's items (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2017). In addition, recently, they have been granted a great deal of importance in terms of early development, playing an active role in early socialisation, including gender socialisation (Oltra-Albiach & Pardo-Coy, 2015; Cañamares-Torrijos, & Moya-Guijarro, 2019; Moya-Guijarro & Cañamares-Torrijos, 2020).

Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on gender representation in CYL, but they generally analyse the main character, often a child (Evans & Davies, 2000; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006). However, some researchers have studied different representations of parenting (Martin, 2005; Sunderland, 2006; Adams et al., 2011; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2021). Considering the significance of picturebooks for early learners, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of mothers and their gender-stereotyping (Strouse et al., 2018; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2021).

Methodology

A systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran, 2008) of a selection of picturebooks was performed (Moya-Guijarro, 2014; Painter, 2017), analysing verbal and graphic texts to deduce the deep meaning and content of the picturebooks. Three different perspectives have been applied—semantic, narratological, and sociological—in order to observe the three metafunctions specified by Halliday & Matthiessen (2014): representational, textual and interpersonal. Three parameters are analysed: the attitude of the character of the mother in the picturebooks (Martín & White, 2005), the type of narrator that develops the plot so that the main voices can be identified (Kovač, 2017), and the representations of other characters appearing in the picturebook with focus on their relationship with the mother (Frank, 2010).

Sample Selection Process

The sample was selected by a non-probabilistic convenience process based on the authors' previous knowledge of the editorial context of the picturebook in Spain.

The following parameters were applied to identify the most popular picturebooks on mother characters in Spain during the last 7 years: (1) mothers should appear

as main characters; (2) they were published by commercially successful publishing houses (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2017) -see outlines in Table 1; (3) they were reviewed in prestigious blogs on CYL and childcare with more than 3000 visits a month (monthly traffic calculated using *Site Worth Traffic* and *Sem-Rush*, as well-known competitive research engines) (Table 2).

Data Analysis Procedure

All picturebooks included in the final sample were analysed following a systematic categorisation based on three different parameters: the mother's affects, the type of narrator, and the relationship of the mother with other characters in the picturebooks.

The first parameter dealt with mothers' attitudes: these were codified using the affective subcategorisation established by Martin & White (2005) applied from a gender perspective as Tian did in 2010 (see Table 3). Even if these models originated in Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) systemic-functional linguistics and the semantic areas of emotions (affect), ethics (judgement), and aesthetics (appreciation), in the case of the mothers' affective networks, the first was considered the essential semantic core, as it dealt with the expression of positive and negative feelings (Oteíza, 2017). It must be noted that to explore the changes experienced in the role of the mother in CYL in Spain and how it affects the relationships with the rest of the members of the family, Martín & White's (2005) categorisation of emotions and their variables was applied. In this categorisation, the concept of affect is paramount in drawn representations of women as it acts as a differentiating element in male and female stereotypes (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the mothers' features, both in the picture and the text presenting positive or negative affect emotions, was examined.

The second analysed parameter concerns narratology (Kovač, 2017) and the textual metafunction: it examined the type of narrator, based on the categories established by Genette (1983), i.e., homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, intradiegetic, extradiegetic, and autodiegetic, and explored the repercussions of the narrating voice and its associations with family relationships.

The third parameter, which focuses on Halliday & Matthiessen's interpersonal metafunction (2014), dealt with the presence of other characters, and aimed to analyse their relationship with the mother from a socio-narratological point of view (Frank, 2010; Santamaría-García, 2021).

Results and Discussion

This section, departing from the results of the analysis performed, examines the development of the representation of the role of the mother and her relationship with the rest of the members of the nuclear family in the analysed sample. Three main elements will be discussed: the representations of the mothers' affections according to systemic functional linguistics and linking with the visual and literary element, the type of narrator and her relationship with the rest of the members of the family.

Table 1 Analysed picturebooks

Analysed Picturebooks	Outline	Prizes	Google entries ("title"+ blog, 11/08/2021)	Reviewed in
Bonilla, R., Mallet, O. (2016) *Max y los superhéroes*. Algar.	A boy describes his favourite superhero: his mum.	Best Edited Children's Book Prize (Generalitat Valenciana, 2016) Kirico Prize, 2017	5380	apegoyliteratura.es crianzaentreletras.com cuentosenlanube.com refugiodecrianza.com
Carretero, M. (2016). *Los vestidos de mamá*. Cuentos de Luz.	A young girl describes her mother's dresses associating them with her different feelings.	Moonbeam Children's Book Award 2016 (Silver medal)	34600	apegoyliteratura.es lamamafaelquepot.com
Servant, S., Houdart, E. (2016) *Madre entre el sol y la noche*. Libros del Zorro Rojo.	What appears to be a monologue by a little girl describing her mother's ambivalent feelings towards her turns out to be a dialogue between the two, full of sweetness, pain and deep understanding.	Grand prix de l'illustration 2016	2650	abretelibro.com linternasybosques.com lupadelcuento.org
Ruiz Johnson, M. (2013). *Mamá*. Kalandraka.	A series of natural similitudes to identify maternity and maternal love.	VI Compostela Picturebook International Award 2013	6580	apegoyliteratura.es biblioabrazo.wordpress.com pekeleke.es
Tello, J. (2017) *Mamá al galope*. Flamboyant.	A mother turns into a horse to cope with the rhythm and necessities of her children, but discovers that efficiency is not synonymous with happiness.	Cuatrogatos Foundation Award 2018	808	bichitoslectores.es elultimokoala.com mamatieneunplan.com unamamanovata.com

Table 1 (continued)

Analysed Picturebooks	Outline	Prizes	Google entries ("title"+ blog, 11/08/2021)	Reviewed in
Crowther, K. (2020) *Madre medusa*. Ekaré.	Medusa, a monster with long and living hair, gives birth to a baby girl and hides her from the world to protect her, until the girl asks for friends and freedom.	The author won the following prizes: Madrid Booksellers Guild Illustrated Book of the Year (2020) Kiddo Leespluim (2002) Silver Brush (2005) Premio Memorial Astrid Lindgren (2010) Estilete de Plata (2011) Boekenpauw (2016)	3440	canallector.com linternasybosques.com rayuelainfancia.com
Taboada, B., Padrón, D. (2020) *A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza*. Algar.	A young girl describes her mother in her hardest days using weather similitudes.	Finalist in the 1st Algar Children's Book Prize	3120	abrecuentos.com crianzaenflor.cl cuentosquecontar.com librosquehayqueleer-laky.blogspot.com

Table 2 Blogs and monthly unique visitors

Blog	Classification	Aprox. Monthly Unique Visitors (source: Site Worth Traffic/Sem-Rush)
http://abrecuentos.com/	CYL	10860 (SWT)
http://abretelibro.com/	CYL	23790 (SWT)
http://apegoyliteratura.es/	Childrearing	20610 (SWT)
http://biblioabrazo.wordpress.com/	CYL	4100 (SR)
http://bichitoslectores.es/	CYL	2880 (SWT)
http://canallector.com/	CYL	9810 (SWT)
http://crianzaenflor.cl/	Childrearing	9810 (SWT)
http://crianzaentreletras.com/	Childrearing	8700 (SWT)
http://cuentosenlanube.com/	CYL	11900 (SWT)
http://cuentosquecontar.com/	CYL	10380 (SWT)
http://elultimokoala.com/	Childrearing	62000 (SR)
http://lamamafaelquepot.com/	Childrearing	3400 (SR)
http://librosquehayqueleer-laky.blogspot.com/	CYL	13900 (SR)
http://linternasybosques.com/	CYL	16290 (SWT)
http://lupadelcuento.org/	CYL	7170 (SWT)
http://mamatieneunplan.com/	Childrearing	18600 (SR)
http://pekeleke.es/	Childrearing	12870 (SWT)
http://rayuelainfancia.com/	CYL	20500 (SR)
http://refugiodecrianza.com/	Childrearing	17250 (SWT)
http://revistababar.com/	CYL	9810 (SWT)
http://unamamanovata.com/	Childrearing	27500 (SR)

In this regard, the analysis of the lack of presence of the father figure and the relationships between the mother and her children -with special attention to the relationship with daughters- is emphasised.

Representation of the Mother's Affects

All images and texts reveal very specific affects and feelings coming from the analysed representations of the mother, towards both themselves and other family members.

In Table 3, even if the extremes were balanced, there appears a significant trend towards reflecting positive aspects, which means that "good" feelings about motherhood were always present. However, it is interesting to note that, in some cases, there are complete absences of negative aspects, e.g., in *Max y los superhéroes* (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018), or partial ones as in *Los vestidos de mamá* (Carretero, 2016), with just one reference to sadness. The rest of the picturebooks covered a great variety of affects that include sadness, unhappiness, stress, anxiety, fear, discomfort, aversion and even boredom. Despite a certain degree of

Table 3 Analysis of the mother's affective network (attitude)

Title	Matters of the heart		Ecosocial well-being		Pursuit of objectives	
	Unhappiness	Happiness	Insecurity	Security	Dissatisfaction	Satisfaction
Mamá	Annoyance	Joy/love	Fear	Trust/security		Curiosity respect/content
Los vestidos de mamá	Sadness	Joy/calm/passion		Trust/security		Curiosity/adventure
A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza	Annoyance/sadness/hate	Joy/fun	Confusion/stress	Trust	Discomfort/disgust	Curiosity
Madre medusa	Annoyance/hate/sadness	Happiness/joy/love	Mistrust/anxiety	Protection/security	Disgust/aversion	Happiness/satisfaction/curiosity
Mamá al galope	Sadness/annoyance	Fun/joy	Stress/confusion	Trust	Disgust/tiredness/boredom/discomfort	Personal fulfilment/peace
Max y los superhéroes		Joy/happiness/fun/love		Trust		Curiosity/personal fulfilment
Madre entre el sol y la noche	Sadness/annoyance	Love/joy	Anxiety/fear/distress	Trust/security	Disgust/discomfort	Curiosity/fullness

acknowledgement of fear linked to ecosocial wellbeing, the lack of affects associated with the mothers' dissatisfaction in the pursuit of objectives is remarkable.

From the dichotomous perspective mentioned in the context, the analysed picturebooks start to overcome the archetype of the good mother (see Table 3) as the mother in fact has a voice and the right to explore her own negative and positive feelings. The sample shows a balance in most of the picturebooks between positive and negative polarities. However, as explained further, there still appears to be some resistance to dealing with negative feelings.

One of the analysed picturebooks can be traced back to the tradition of the perfect mother from liberal feminism: *Max y los superhéroes* (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018). Even if she is represented as a *wonder woman* with no room for imperfections (see Fig. 1), the protagonist of this story does not seem to be uncomfortable, as she is depicted, in a comic-like fashion, as a superheroine who can solve any working or domestic problem. There is a sort of masculinisation of women; Sau (2001) arguing that the metaphor of the superheroine is not an innocent one, as even when introduced into public and work spheres, does not neglect the care duties attributed to hyper-feminised women.

In this regard, *Mamá al galope* (Tello, 2017) deals with that overload from a different approach: the main character must become a horse to meet all the demands of being a mother. The picturebook uses humour for an estrangement effect, as the mother is thankful for the transformation, until she realises that she has lost her real identity (see Fig. 2). The mother has completely lost her own voice in the pursuit of a frustrating, standardised role (see Table 3 for the lack of positive polarity in the pursuit of aims in *Mamá al galope).*

The picturebook *Mamá* (Ruiz Johnson, 2013) shows a completely contrary perspective. The main character is defined by her own son as 'a universe that everything hides' (Ruiz Johnson, 2013, pp. 22–23), inaugurating a close-to-nature form of mothering (Martucci, 2015; Mellor, 2018). The mother in this work feels fears and sadness, even though negative emotions connected with ecosocial wellbeing or the pursuit of aims (see Table 3) were systematically sweetened. This picturebook is associated with a kind of feminism that reclaims female qualities such as sensibility, intuition, less aggression, and the capacity to protect and

Fig. 1 The supermother saving all the pets of the house (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018, pp. 31–32). Courtesy of the publisher. @2018. Algar. *Max y los superheroes*. Text and illustrations Rocío Bonilla & Oriol Mallet

Fig. 2 The mother, transformed into a horse, crying while holding her daughter's hand (Tello, 2017, p. 31). Courtesy of the publisher. © 2017, Editorial Flamboyant. *Mamá al galope.* Text and illustrations by Jimena Tello

care (Stephens, 2012), assuming that these are the universal characteristics of all women (see Fig. 3).

Something different happens in *Los vestidos de mama* (Carretero, 2016), where the mother changes her dress on every page, showing the different emotions or activities that a person can experience in a day. However, the picturebook lacks emotional complexity, as only superficial sadness is addressed, without hint of deeper investigation (Fig. 4).

On the contrary, in *A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza* (Taboada & Padrón, 2020)*,* there is a crescendo in the expression of negativity, which is balanced by the positive affections. The main character is saddened, angered and bored by society's demands or lack of aims (see Fig. 5). Nevertheless, the

Fig. 3 The mother peacefully plays with her son, surrounded by sea elements (Ruiz Johnson, 2013, pp. 16–17). Courtesy of the publisher. @ 2013, Editorial Kalandra. *Mamá.* Text and illustrations by Mariana Ruiz Johnson

Fig. 4 The daughter, holding a torch, observes her mother lying in bed dressed in black (Carretero, 2016, pp. 14–15). Courtesy of the publisher. @ 2016, Cuentos de luz. *Los vestidos de mamá.* Text and illustrations by Mónica Carretero

expression 'a veces' (sometimes) in the title states that the mother is not always bad-tempered.

Regarding affective complexity, the picturebook with more subtleties in the emotional tone is *Madre entre el sol y la noche* (Servant & Houdart, 2016). This work opens doors to a variety of affections of negative and positive polarisations (see Table 3). Associated with the natural current of mothering, it does not avoid traditionally silenced topics such as the puerperium (Zivoder et al., 2019). However, in *Madre entre el sol y la noche* (Servant & Houdart, 2016)*,* the protagonist's own identity is more precisely underlined, with no need for it to be universal.

Madre Medusa (Crowther, 2020) can also be included in this demythologizing current. This picturebook presents a monstrous, enigmatic creature whose long hairs move about and perform all manner of maternal functions (see Fig. 6). It is a metaphoric narration about motherly love and the protective instinct that touches all
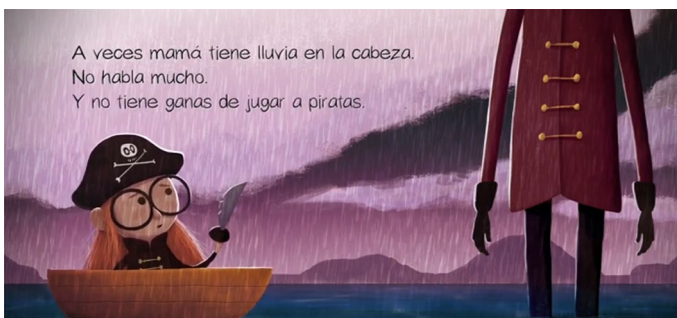

Fig. 5 In the middle of a tempest, the daughter, dressed as a pirate, observes her mother -seen in section thus genderless- from her boat (Taboada & Padrón, 2020, pp. 7–8). Courtesy of the publisher. @ 2020, Algar. *A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza.* Text by Bea Taboada and illustrations by Dani Padrón

Fig. 6 Madre Medusa introduces her daughter to the people, but does not let anyone hold her (Crowther, 2020, pp. 14–15). Courtesy of the publisher. @2014, l'école des loisirs. *Mére Méduse*. Text and illustrations by Kitty Crowther. Rights acquired through Isabelle Torrubia Literary Agency. 2016, translation: María Carolina Concha. @ 2020, of this edition. *Madre Medusa*. Text and illustrations by Kitty Crowther. Ediciones ekaré

kinds of affections (see Table 3), positively and negatively, rejecting the heteronormative dimension of motherhood throughout.

Type of Narrator

Following the classification established by Genette (1983), the analysis of the narrating voices in these picturebooks reveals that, in most cases, the story is told by a daughter of the protagonist. It is no surprise: daughters are the characters who discover the identities and contradictions of their own mothers (see Tables 4, 5). When the narrator is extradiegetic, the co-protagonists might be a son (*Max y los superhéroes*) or a daughter (*Madre Medusa*).

Looking at all the characters in the narration, there was no other carer apart from the mother. No father figure was included in the picturebooks, except for *Madre*

Table 4 Narrating voices

Extradiegetic narrator	Intradiegetic narrator (son)	Intradiegetic narrator (daughter)
	Mamá	*Madre entre el sol y la noche*
	Mamá al galope	
Madre Medusa		
		Los vestidos de mamá
Max y los superhéroes		
		A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza

Table 5 Other characters

Picturebook	Other characters
Mamá	Son
Los vestidos de mama	Daughter
A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza	Daughter
Madre medusa	Daughter, midwives
Mamá al galope	Son, daughter
Max y los superhéroes	Son
Madre entre el sol y la noche	Daughter, father

entre el sol y la noche (Servant & Houdart, 2016). In *Madre Medusa* (Crowther, 2020), a group of midwives appear, but even if they do help the main character to give birth, Madre Medusa throws them out once her daughter has been born. Children appear in all the analysed picturebooks, with a higher presence of females (71% include daughters, 43% include sons).

Other Family Members and Their Relationship with the Mother

As Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) underline, interpersonal metafunction puts the accent on the relationships we create around us as a way to convey meaning. Therefore, to understand the role of the mother in picturebooks, it is necessary to observe the relationships that this character creates with her environment.

Absent Fathers?

The nearly complete absence of the paternal figure in the picturebooks does not come as a surprise. Anderson & Hamilton's (2005) analysis of the differences between the roles of mothers and fathers showed an unequal representation of parents, with stereotyped father representations "significantly underrepresented, and presented as unaffectionate" (p. 149). Even if a slight progression towards the role of a more involved father has been observed (Adams et al., 2011), filiation is still a universal construct (Ross, 2017), which devolves almost exclusively to the mother's responsibility.

The scarce presence of the figure of the father in the analysed picturebooks cannot be interpreted in any other way. The absence of the father in the analysed picturebooks is, therefore, intended to place the figure of the mother at the forefront, providing her with an absolute voice. And here, the mother may be performing the role of super carer, to which she is traditionally relegated—as in *Max y los superhéroes* (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018), or of which she is bored—as in *Mamá al galope* (Tello, 2017). This implies that motherhood is far from being valued by society, as revealed by the complexity of negative affections in the part devoted to ecosocial wellbeing (see Table 3). In Spanish literature, women's representations have traditionally been established under patriarchal values and, therefore, motherhood as a non-patriarchal institution does not exist as its representations lack any cultural,

ethical, or social functions if mothers have always been considered as mere carriers of future subjects (Showalter, 1978).

In this sense, further examination of *Madre entre el sol y la noche* (Servant & Houdart, 2016) is necessary, as it is the only picturebook included in the sample in which the figure of the father explicitly appears. It is a brief appearance that is not linked to the daughter's upbringing. In fact, as seen in Fig. 7, the father appears as taking care of his partner, not his daughter. This perspective shows the couple's attention to the social role of the mother, and, consequently, depatriarchalizes the man from the role of mere provider or house-chore helper, and places him in the context of a carer.

This is a clear example of *female literature* (Showalter, 1978), as also seen in the use of poetic and metaphoric language: text and pictures are finally focused on an authentic analysis of the feelings associated with motherhood. The mother is the centre of the picturebook, but as a complete woman, experiencing that particular stage of her life.

Mothers and Sons… and Daughters

Logically, as the concept of maternity implies creating unbreakable ties between the mother and child, children appeared in all the analysed picturebooks. The study of the ties established in these texts implies, for that very reason, understanding the notion of motherhood that each of the picturebooks tries to convey.

Mi madre tiene el amor a flor de piel.
Un jardín entero.

Plantas silvestres, brezo, lilas o cardos.
Una se puede raspar, acurrucar o pinchar.
Muy pronto, mi padre y yo aprendimos
a cuidar el jardín.

Fig. 7 The mother embodying a plant is lying while the father waters her and the daughter observes and caresses her (Servant & Houdart, 2016, pp. 8–9). Original title: Ma mere. © 2015, Éditions Thierry Magnier. Text by Stéphane Servant and illustrations by Emmanuelle Houdart. Rights acquired through Isabelle Torrubia Literary Agency. 2016, translation: Luisa Antolín Villota. © 2016, of this edition: Libros del Zorro Rojo

Showalter's (1978) triad of feminine, feminist and female writing becomes particularly explicit when it comes to the analysis of these ties, specifically when the narrating voices in the picturebooks are examined (see Table 4). In all cases, listening to themselves through their children's voices—or reading themselves through their children's eyes– enables mothers, who are simultaneously characters and readers, to grasp their under-construction identities. It should be noted that in the picturebooks representing *feminist literature*, in which female characters defend their capacities while expressly or implicitly confronting the patriarchal omnipresence, all the children are male. Examples of this are *Max y los súperheroes* (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018), representing the role of wonder woman, and *Mamá* (Ruiz Johnson, 2013)*,* where the mother embodies universal nature (Puleo, 2002). Moreover, in *Max y los súperheroes* (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018) the narrator is extradiegetic (Table 4), and therefore, the mother's voice appears filtered from somebody else's perspective. However, *female* writing, more mature, and richer in contradictions, only seems to emerge when the co-protagonists are daughters.

However, the emphasis on the tie between mother and daughter is more than an ideological trend. This tie obviously differs from the mother-and-son bond, as the former includes the emotional legacy of the maternal model (Marsh, 2012). As early as 1976, Rich warned of the fact that 'the cathexis between mother and daughter-essential, distorted, misused- is the great unwritten story' (p. 227). Burin (2017), when examining construction of subjectivities, pointed out that the mother would experience a stronger feeling of uniqueness and continuity with her daughter than with her son. It is evident that there still is an unconscious ideal of motherhood that is transmitted by the archetype represented by girls in their games (Alizade, 2006). Nonetheless, some of these picturebooks convey the need for the daughter to break free from that, and it is peculiar that girls, and not boys, are the co-protagonists and the narrators of the story. In *Los vestidos de mamá* (Carretero, 2016)*,* the daughter identifies and recognises the mother's different moods, even if there is a lack of visual contact between mother and daughter, as if disconnecting was necessary to be able to emotionally detach from the progeny.

This does not happen in *A veces mi mama tiene truenos en la cabeza* (Taboada & Padrón, 2020): negative emotions are welcomed, without any taint of guilt, and the contact between mother and daughter allows this growth and self-acceptance, even if it happens in a vertical sense, with the mother being responsible for the daughter's learning (see Fig. 5). In *Madre Medusa* (Crowther, 2020)*,* perhaps one of the most ground-breaking picturebooks analysed, the verticality of this learning is broken. At the beginning of the picturebook, the contact between mother and daughter is oppressive. The daughter is identified by the mother as an extension of herself who must be jealously guarded. It is the daughter herself who finally asks for space, with an empathic dialogue that offers a relationship as equals: the daughter's education finally escapes from the verticality of twentieth century patriarchal structures. In this regard, it is interesting that the narration is directed by an extradiegetic narrator (see Table 4), who observes the whims of mother and daughter without judging.

Therefore, the evolution of the mother-daughter relationship has been examined by exemplifying it, moving from a clear separation and a vertical relationship to a horizontal and osmotic growth. The pinnacle of all these relationships

appears in *Madre entre el sol y la noche* (Servant & Houdart, 2016), where the specular connection between mother and daughter is represented. The story is narrated through the voice of the daughter, who is represented exactly as her mother but on a smaller scale. Most of the symbols they carry were passed to one another through the narration: the balls of yarn, the oil lamp, the doll, the rake, but also a bird's body and tears. As happens in *A veces mama tiene truenos en la cabeza* (Taboada & Padrón, 2020), not only does the anger felt by one character justify the anger of the other, but they also forge an alliance of care, a network of support, a secure base for true mutual development. While the mother was crying, the daughter knitted a glove: by knitting, she repeated and perpetuated maternal actions (in the first image the mother was carrying skeins), but also showed she cared (the knitting as a sign of love and warm protection) and prepared for a potentially complicated cohabitation, as the gloves recall falconry (and in the symbiosis of the falcon and the falconer, the glove is the safe perch for the falcon, and at the same time protects the falconer from the bird's talons).

However, the mother immediately made it clear to her daughter that their tie was not threatened even if she was absent, showing a secure attachment that separates her from the model of the unconditional mother (Turin, 1995). The mother supported her own inner child (Miller, 1981) and the daughter accepted that her mother's heart was 'between the sun and the night', while she held an oil lamp of her own.

It has been argued that social constructs regarding what is male or female are not physiological, but cultural, as they emerge from a performative and imitative practice (Butler, 1990). Therefore, if children and mothers themselves, as readers of the picturebooks, continue to perpetuate an idealised image of sacrificed and darkness-free motherhood (Kaplan, 2013), that archetype will probably never be modified. Non-mystified writing on and about the mother, then, implies a liberation for daughters, an overcoming of matrophobia (Rich, 1976). However, this also implies, for sons and daughters alike, a display of emotions that are not traditionally associated with their assigned gender roles (Bronstein et al., 1996), with the resulting capacity for generating a new vision of the male and the female. Indeed, one fact that reveals the overcoming of gender in the univocal identification of the daughter with the figure of the mother is that the author of the text of *Madre entre el sol y la noche* is a man, Stéphane Servant (an exception among all the picturebooks). If we forget the label of men/women and, by extension, father/mother with all the associated social constructs, and if we work on the public and personal spheres to transform the family into a mutual support network, the whole family structure will be reinforced. Generally, a respected motherhood that accepts all different kinds of affections can facilitate a more complete psychosocial development for all the family (Boyum & Parke, 1995; Cassidy et al., 1992). At the same time, it should be noted that the relationships of these characters is no longer unidirectional, but multidimensional, considering other aspects outside the family. To sum up, leaving behind the binary simplification that supports the patriarchal system (Sendón, 2002) and which limits mothers and fathers to their traditional roles.

Implications

Even if there is a current trend towards fostering the use of neutral terms for parenting in the implementation of current policies, the experiences of mothers and fathers of family life are still strongly influenced by gender (Veazey, 2018). Moreover, there is a clear disconnection between the biological reality of a woman and what society expects from her: this leads to a series of clichés that contribute to an excessive and stereotypical burden placed on the figure of the mother (Chrisler, 2013) which this study has found reflected in CYL. Fortunately, women have found their own social and artistic paths to rise against this generalised attitude, both in the field of literature and in society itself. Based on these changes, the analysed picturebooks clearly unmask the existing conflicts that arise when contrasting the reality of motherhood with the ideal. Some of these picturebooks manage to eradicate the romantic images of parenthood, as portrayed by popular and social media which, along with ideologies and expert counselling, have contributed to increased family stress (Harries & Brown, 2017).

Also, in *Madre entre el sol y la noche* and *Madre Medusa*, the analysed picturebooks openly criticise capitalist society and its attempt 'to privatise child-rearing and, at least discursively, to cast parenthood as a private choice rather than one that merits state support' (Johnston-Ataata, 2018, p. 193).

The relevance of these narrations regarding the children is also interesting, as, generally, they do not show the inevitability of passive suffering (Rich, 1976) in the sense of sacrifice, but a revelation of suffering as a normal transformation process, that is progressively revealed as an empowering element (O'Reilly, 2012).

Taking mothers away from the role of victims and essential carer also leaves space for new forms of masculinity and fatherhood that are not focused on the role as breadwinner or as mere helper with the housework. The implications for literature are that, not only could we delve into a redefinition of what it means to be a woman and a mother, but we could also support a redefinition of the family sphere and the networks and social links surrounding it.

Conclusions

Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insights into the characterisation of mothers in picturebooks read in Spain over the last 5 years. Although the sample is relatively limited, the parameters applied for the selections of the picturebooks guaranteed a selection that offers valuable insights into the aspects that are currently transforming the mother's representation in CYL.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study extends the literature on the representation of mothering in picturebooks, focusing on the current publishing scene in Spain. The repertoire of books analysed in this article, which brings together the most widely read, awarded and sold texts in Spain over the last 7 years with the mother as a central character, seems to show that the country has

finally begun to leave behind a traditional, conservative imagery associated with motherhood, which used to limit being a mother to a universal experience of self-denial when positive, versus cruel rejection when negative.

The analysed picturebooks allow us to distinguish the emergence of a more complex characterisation of mothers, their affections and their relationships with the rest of the family members. Even if some of the studied texts still refer to a 'close to nature' form of mothering (Ruiz Johnson, 2013) or to 'super mothers' (Bonilla & Mallet, 2018), both still mirroring a predominantly patriarchal vision of motherhood, other texts finally challenge this perfectionist and mercantilist reading of reality (Tello, 2017). Picturebooks such as *A veces mamá tiene truenos en la cabeza* (Taboada & Padrón, 2020) or *Los vestidos de mamá* (Carretero, 2016) give a genuine voice to mothers and allow them to shape - together with their children, specifically their daughters - an identity in constant transformation and redefinition. At last, the ambivalence of maternal feelings, which are not always positive, not always serene, almost never universal, is acknowledged: the mother is finally legitimised as an all-round adult subject, in whom moments of extroversion and introversion, and even angry aspects can perfectly coexist. Furthermore, there is no longer need to hide this complexity, or to apologise for it: the mother, as the protagonist of these texts and often the mediator of their reading to children, investigates her own identity in a space shared with the young readers, that of the picturebook itself. The family, inside and outside the page, is resemantized: roles are exchanged, growth becomes collective and synchronic; love, like empathy, is learned by loving and being loved, in a virtuous circle of affection and care that is, first of all, *self-caring*.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval (include appropriate approvals or waivers) Not applicable.

Research Involving Humans and/or Animals Not applicable.

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