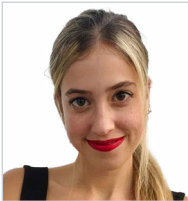


The construction of identity in Juan José Millás' literary journalism: the Nevenka Fernández case

La construcción de la identidad en el periodismo literario de Juan José Millás: el caso Nevenka Fernández



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Abstract:

Journalism occupies an important place in Spanish writer Juan José Millás' career (Valencia, 1946). This author has combined the publication of his novels with an extensive career in the Spanish media and became a regular columnist for the newspaper *El País* and an essential reporter for the supplement *El País Semanal*. These journalistic texts have structural, linguistic, and discursive similarities with his fiction novels. However, among all the similarities, the theme of identity is the most significant. The theme of identity runs through all his works and lays the foundations for substantial elements such as selecting characters or the story's focus. This article proposes a qualitative textual and semiotic analysis of the non-fiction novel *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad* to make an extensive study on this topic and demonstrate the connections between his literature and his journalism, in which Millás reflects on identity and the factors involved in its construction.

Keywords:

Identity; Juan José Millás; Nevenka Fernández; nonfiction; Literary Journalism.

Resumen:

*En la prolífica trayectoria del escritor español Juan José Millás (Valencia, 1946) el periodismo ocupa un lugar destacado. Lejos de ser un oficio circunstancial, este autor ha simultaneado la publicación de sus novelas con una extensa carrera en los medios de comunicación nacionales, convirtiéndose en articulista habitual del diario El País o reportero destacado del suplemento dominical El País Semanal. Todos estos trabajos presentan similitudes estructurales, lingüísticas y discursivas con su escritura ficción. No obstante, entre todas estas semejanzas que son posibles localizar, existe una que atraviesa a toda su producción y que sienta las bases de elementos tan significativos como la selección de personajes o el enfoque del relato: el tema de la identidad. Con el fin de hacer un estudio extenso sobre este tema y demostrar las conexiones que existen entre su literatura y su periodismo, este artículo propone un análisis cualitativo textual y semiótico de la obra de no-ficción *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad*, en la que Millás reflexiona acerca de la identidad del individuo y de los factores que intervienen en su construcción.*

Palabras clave:

Identidad; Juan José Millás; Nevenka Fernández; no ficción; Periodismo Literario.

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1. Introduction

"I find it very difficult to see the boundary between writer and journalist. Especially in the genres in which I work." These statements highlight the close connection between Juan José Millás' journalistic work and literature and appeared in *Jot Down* in 2012¹. This author is part of the literary journalism tradition, "a macro genre, grouping together a set of texts under other genres, which are both literature and journalism simultaneously" (Angulo and Rodríguez, 2010: 11). Although part of journalism, it is a phenomenon that uses other branches of literature, historiography, sociology, or documentation to tell a story through different narrative tools, without renouncing principles such as research or truth (Cuartero, 2019).

The notion of literary journalism is controversial and is the subject of much discussion². Despite this, there is some consensus concerning specific characteristics. For instance, the literary journalist has a subjective, creative, and rejecting attitude to pre-established structures, making immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism intrinsic to these works (Fernández and López, 2013). According to Norman Sims, creator of the anthology *The Literary Journalists* (1984), the essence of literary journalism lies in its interest in understanding culture and human nature. Therefore, aesthetics serves the information and does not only aim to embellish the story but also to pay attention "to the details that traditional and standardised journalism ignore, reaching a more human dimension and therefore the more real dimension of the story" (Angulo and Rodríguez, 2010: 12).

However, the writer's personal view is the most defining element: "It is a nude person's voice [...] who speaks for themselves. Someone who has gained insight into their experiences based on their own reflections, but maintains their particularities, sarcasm, doubts, and does not erase their emotional realities of sadness, joy, excitement, fury, love" (Kramer, 2001). Many researchers go further and argue that literary journalism is "an independent genre that can only be practised by those journalists who have been directly educated from poetry to the novel" (Gutiérrez, 2009: 46).

Literary journalism began to establish itself in Spain with Mariano José de Larra and the costumbrists; it continued to develop through opinion journalism and essays by thinkers such as Leopoldo Alas, Miguel de Unamano, Azorín, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, or José Ortega y Gasset; and led to Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's, Wenceslao Fernández Flórez's or Julio Camba's informative and literary journalism (Chillón, 1993). Today, some authors stand out as the contemporary heirs of these authors, such as Francisco Umbral, Manuel Vicent, Maruja Torres, Manuel Leguineche, Raúl del Pozo, Rosa Montero, or the subject of study of this analysis, Juan José Millás.

1 These have not been the only statements in which Millás has reflected on the intrinsic relationships between journalism and literature. The author has leveraged several events throughout his career to record the transfer generated between the two areas. "[...] with journalism, I have experienced a lot, and most of these experiments I have used in my literature. My literature would be very different and undoubtedly worse without my journalism. And my journalism would not have its virtues if it were not for my literature" (Cruz, 2016: 207). Despite these interrelations, he has also highlighted that he is aware of the barriers that exist between one discipline and another: "[...] there are norms. If you work in one medium where the pact is with the reader what you are going to tell has happened, you have to respect it" (Sarriá, 2019).

2 From López Pan's perspective (2004: 223), those who reject literary journalism do so "restricting the notions of journalism and literature, since there is journalism that goes beyond what is informative and literature that goes beyond what is artistic." Muñoz-Torres (2002) explains this rejection for associating literature with aesthetics and journalism with other concepts like objectivity, communication efficiency, or stylistic austerity. There is no consensus regarding the name for the so-called proposals. Several terms are employed to refer to this journalistic practice: long-form journalism, long-form chronicle, book journalism, narrative journalism, testimonial novel, true fiction, non-fiction literature. (Fernández & López, 2013). Such is the level of disagreement that we have found over thirty terms (Cuartero, 2019).

Juan José Millás is a Spanish writer who has combined his journalistic work with his literary work, complying with the precepts that underpin each discipline. All his works show his particular worldview and incorporate common characteristics such as structure, characters, space-time elements, or narrative techniques. However, the aspect that most distinguishes Millás' style from other writers from his generation is the questioning of identity, a thematic axis that runs through all his works.

This author describes his tense coexistence with reality in his works, which he feels he does not belong to. He believes that reality is based on appearances, extravagances, and contradictions, an orthodox model assimilated through institutions such as the family, education system, or the media, which are responsible for defining notions such as normality, strangeness, the logical or absurd (Ródenas, 2006). Consequently, he argues that what we call reality is nothing more than a "consensual delirium" (Arenas, 2019). This perception is also applied to his characters, whose stories are based on their struggle against the world and objective to shape a new identity, alien to these pre-established conventionalisms.

This research aims to analyse how the theme of identity in his non-fiction novel *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: El caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad* is addressed, and the correlations between the novel's ideas and his other works. Thus, despite the differences between the disciplines, we aim to demonstrate how the same thought interconnects this author's literature and journalism.

2. Methodology

The main aim of this article is to address the theme of identity in *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad*, written by Juan José Millás and published in 2004. Therefore, it is part of the line of research that studies the journalistic message, which analyses the linguistic and literary features of informative discourses in parallel with other characteristics of political, cultural, or sociological meaning (Casals, 2005).

In particular, we support the notion defended by some academics, such as Albert Chillón or Gérard Genette, who argue that a journalistic work can be studied as a literary product. Genette proposes in *Ficción y dicción* (1991) that literariness, which usually has been associated with the content of the text, can also come from its form, making it possible for other narrative works to be considered as literature.

Hay algo que no es como me dicen has been selected from Millás' publications. It is his first non-fiction novel, i.e., it is a hybrid novel between journalism and literature, allowing us to gain insight into the similarities between both disciplines. On the one hand, this publication is based on a real event: the "Nevenka case," which resulted in the first sexual harassment sentence for a politician in Spain. On the other hand, it features his fiction's typical resources and recurrent motifs from the plots of his novels.

Many authors defend using qualitative tools because they focus on language, narrative, style, or rhetoric³ when studying the journalistic message. In parallel to this idea, qualitative research is considered the most appropriate mode of research for this analysis as it is directly connected to the purpose of our study. Specifically, we have opted for a qualitative textual and semiotic analysis of the literary-critical condition, developed by New Criticism from the AngloAmerican school and its French counterpart, the *explication du texte* method.

Moreover, "identity" and "estrangement" are categories of analysis. They are two critical concepts in Millás' work that explain his approach to and representation of the reality he researches and narrates. We have followed the psychoanalytic current's definition of identity since it features in the author's works. Psychoanalysis associates the formation of the self with a belief system that acts to sustain an imaginary of the "self" and has little to do with the subject's truth (Elgarte, 2011). Millás views identity through this prism, considering it an agreed-upon construction learned via socialisation and can be confronted through his stories. Concerning the notion of estrangement, Gonzalo Sobejano's essay has been taken as the main reference "*Juan José Millás, fabulador de la extrañeza*" (2007). Estrangement refers to the "alienating effect of the described world on the consciousness living in or describing that world" (Sobejano, 2007: 501) and connects all the main characters in his works, who, driven by existential angst, decide to shun their identity and create a new one, from their fantasies (Knickerbocker, 2007).

Finally, the results have been expanded through an exhaustive literature review of other primary information sources, mainly from studying Juan José Millás' texts. We have primarily focused on the common themes, arguments, and motifs, i.e., on the "intra and inter literary connections of subjects, themes, *topoi* and *loci*, figures, symbols, types, emblems, allegories, motifs, etc." (Chillón, 1999: 407) during these comparative analyses.

We aim to establish the links between Millás' literature and journalism and broaden this author's profile. We also seek to contribute to studies examining the interactions between these two fields and demonstrate that they are connected, despite their differences.

3. Results Analysis of *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad*

3.1. Identity as a fundamental axis of Millás' thought

Juan José Millás was born in Valencia in 1946. He began to gain popularity in the literary scene after winning the *Sésamo* Prize for his second novel *Cerberos son las sombras* (1975). His works have been translated into twenty-three different languages since then. He has received numerous awards, such as the *Nadal* Prize, *Planeta* Prize, and the National Narrative Prize, making him one of the most renowned writers in Spain today.

3 "The study of journalism how to know and teach know-how should focus on studying all these message forms that their activity can generate and how to adapt the message to the different communication media. [...] It matters much more what is said and the possibilities of how to say it than how many times it is said in a certain way" (Casals, 2005: 245).

Millás has always combined his literary and journalistic work, working in several formats for national media. He has collaborated on the radio station Cadena SER in *La Ventana* or *A vivir que son dos días*. He is mainly known for his opinion columns in the print media, although he is a renowned reporter in *El País Semanal*. He acknowledges that these two fields cannot be studied separately: his journalism has been enriched by his literary styles. In turn, many of the changes in his narratives have begun to take place in his print media texts. The origin of *Articuentos*, a genre he created, comes from print media, where he hybridised short stories and opinion columns: “[...] they are texts refractory to classification, straddled between current affairs commentary and story, between referentiality and self-referentiality, between the factual and the fictional” (Ródenas, 2006: 60).

However, one theme stands out that enables a line of continuity to be established between Millás’s literature and journalism: the questioning of identity and, in particular, the main characters’ feeling of not belonging to the world. As Anastasio indicates (2009), any reader familiar with this author’s texts can recognise this hallmark in his writing. He has identified it as a fundamental thematic axis that runs through all his works: “My fundamental problem has been identity, and I think the main concern in my work is to distinguish between the appearance and the reality of things” (Gie Koh, 2011: 239).

For Millás, what we call reality “is a delusional construction that we have agreed upon” (Iglesia, 2017) which, for the moment, there is no alternative. This conception of the world is self-interested and has been created and disseminated by institutions such as the family, politics, religion, school, or the media and apart from governing our behaviour, values, or ideas, gives meaning to concepts needed for organising the social fabric, such as normality, logic or madness (Ródenas, 2006). Millás confronts these conventions through characters in his novels, columns, and reports, where the basis of this preexisting pact cannot be entirely understood. This brings about the characters’ identity crisis, driving them to embark on a journey to discover their true selves, not imposed and an appearance.

In this sense, one of the words that has been used to characterise his work’s main characters is “*accommodation*”: “The individual becomes an automaton: an appearance of an individual who is managed or driven by a superior instance whose ends are hidden from the obedient puppet (Sobejano, 1992: 320). Anastasio (2009) highlights Vicente Holgado, who fabricates his identity by reproducing gestures learned from others, or Olegario, a character from *Tonto, muerto, bastardo e invisible* (1995), disguises his foolishness through imitation. Many of these “accommodated” characters began a process of estrangement when they realise that their personality has been constructed on appearances, in which they distance themselves from what they know and break away from those “elements which, disguised as reality, perhaps prevent us from reaching the real” (Bértolo, 1983: 213).

Estrangement describes how the author analyses what is familiar from a critical perspective. He inherits this from the literary tradition, and it represents those things we are unusually accustomed to (Lodge, 1998). Estrangement is conceptual and is shown through unusual words or stylistic formulas, such as exaggeration or parody:

What do we mean when we say that a book is original? We do not mean, in general, that the writer has invented something unprecedented, but that they have made us perceive something that, in a conceptual sense, [...] has done so by deviating from the conventional, usual ways of representing reality. Defamiliarisation is a word and another way of saying originality (Lodge, 1998: 91).

Some of the author's most celebrated works are constructed on the concept of estrangement. Ródenas (2006) states that this is demonstrated in novels such as *El desorden de tu nombre* (1987), *La soledad era esto* (1990), *Tonto, muerto, bastardo e invisible* (1995), *El orden alfabético* (1998), *No mires debajo de la cama* (1999) or *Dos mujeres en Praga* (2002).

Moreover, this vision is presented in his journalistic texts, as their central theme is based on questioning what is taken for granted, the tangible and randomness (Rojas, 2018). On the one hand, in his columns, there is "access to the workings of the world" (Ródenas, 2006: 64), allowing him to detach himself in order to talk about the downfalls of particular systems or social formulas:

Millás only expresses his view about a current event in his columns. Still, he transforms that event into an unusual phenomenon beforehand; he alienates it as if it belonged to a sphere of experience foreign to him and the reader [...] Millás questions both natural laws (metaphorically) and conventional ones, allowing him to present current events in his columns as the product of chaos, chance or self-interested agreement (Ródenas, 2006: 62-63).

Millás writes hybrid works that combine informative elements with his universe of motifs and obsessions (Ródenas, 2006). In this way, identity also becomes the central axis of these texts:

If in his novels loneliness, individual identity, the person's relationship with their origins, memory, death, spaces, limits... they are reiterated themes, in his columns they are translated into reflection about isolation, illness, democracy's limitations, the surprising advances in biomedicine and its possibilities, technology, and its irruption into our lives, or individuals' marginalisation in a society oblivious to the needs of the most vulnerable (Marín, 2011: 313)

On the other hand, this epistemology of estrangement is more evident in his journalistic texts. Since he began working for *El País Semanal* Sunday supplement, he has tended to write texts whose main aim is to dismantle the prejudices and expectations that, although false, are established in society. His first series of reports exemplify this; *Proyecto sombra* (2001-2006) comprises sixteen instalments describing different characters' day-to-day lives. Despite their differences, they follow the same criteria: individuals whose lives are hampered by stigma. Readers know some of these protagonists well as they work in culture, politics, or sport. The reporter analyses their public image, which is usually based on clichés or subjective judgements different from their true nature. On the other hand, other characters are relevant because of their social, cultural, or economic circumstances despite being anonymous. In these cases, Millás investigates the stereotypes that affect them and tries to make a breakthrough to foster a change in mentality.

It is the starting point of these reports and general literature. There is always a conflict in the origin of the literary text, something to do with an inability to understand reality and their own reality, familiarity with what is familiar to most people. When writing, whether it is a fictional text or a report, one always seeks to try to order reality, which is a way of trying to understand it (Montes, 2012).

His stories are constituted as "the confirmation that there is a reality different from the showy version that we sometimes witness" (Anastasio, 2009: 219). He develops "a critical rereading of the collective experience through the impact that it has on individuals' personal development" through his stories (Tanner, 2016: 16). To do so, he appeals directly to the readers, inviting them to experience what the characters do and thus reinterpret their own immediate reality.

Juan José Millás combines *Proyecto sombra* with the publication of his first non-fiction novel. In *Hay algo que no es como me dicen*, this author takes a sexual abuse case and uses it to reflect on identity and a lack of belonging. The author shows how society is willing to try to silence the victim in order to maintain its hegemonic social structure. On the contrary, Nevenka decides to break away from the imaginary that prevailed at that time; despite her story being rejected, she consequently builds a new identity distanced from previous ideas.

3.2. *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: a literary and journalism work*

Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra realidad is presented as a fictionalised report that reconstructs the events of the so-called “Nevenka case.” Nevenka Fernández publicly denounced being sexually harassed by her boss, the Councillor for Finance and Commerce from the Ponferrada City Council, and the Mayor Ismael Álvarez. This event appeared in the Spanish social news in 2001, making the front pages of prominent newspapers, and it became the main topic on television talk shows.

The book alternates between the present day and the main character’s past and recounts the author’s investigative journalism between 2001 and 2003 to unravel the ins and outs of this case. Through an eponymous first-person narrator, Millás documents specific details about his encounters with Nevenka and describes the obstacles he faced when working on the extensive report. This generates a kind of “meta-report” which not only examines the elements, causes, and consequences of these events but also reflects on his work as a journalist:

Nevenka and I would sit at a table in that room every Monday or Thursday, depending on the day we had arranged to meet, and I would turn on the tape recorder, take out the notebooks, and we would start talking. Naturally, she did most of the talking. I limited myself to provoking her so that she would explain herself; I would trip her up, I would confront her with contradictions [...] (Millás, 2004: 40)

The author reveals what sparked his interest in this event in the information he provides in this work. Nevenka Fernández is a figure from Spanish social reality with the characteristics of the Millás universe. She publicly denounces her situation as councillor, rejecting her environment’s social conventions, which forced her to fulfill a gender role based on docility and discretion⁴: “I added that I had been struck by the way this woman had secluded herself from the social and cultural group that she belonged to without having a replacement group” (Millás, 2004: 32). Therefore, this work reflects on identity, whose focus steers away from the harassment itself. Instead, it centres on the main character’s evolution, whose personality is constructed on prejudices that are gradually deconstructed to the extent that she creates a new personal story: “[...] By reporting the case, she had renounced her identity without having a replacement one (Millás, 2004: 25).

⁴ The author had already been interested in the event before this work, dedicating a column to “Nevenka,” published in *El País* on 6 June 2002. Almost 20 years later, on 5 March 2021, “Netflix premiered *Nevenka*, a docuseries directed by Maribel Sánchez-Maroto in which Millás also participated, talking about the writer’s experience and the protagonist’s evolution after meeting several times. In all these formats, he has always highlighted the causes that led him to investigate this event, which respond to the central themes of his narrative universe “[...] the interesting thing is the victim’s process of estrangement. “Speak to him,” her parents naïvely told her, reluctant to believe that an individual who defended the same order they believed in was a scoundrel” (Millás, 2002).

Millás shows a line of continuity between Nevenka and his novels' main characters: "Sometimes life produces novels spontaneously, and it seemed like there was a novel there [...] I had, to put it in our jargon, the feeling that there was a "story" there and I wanted to tell it" (Millás, 2004: 28). He even establishes connections with specific literary characters and the councillor's personality, who he calls "novelistic" (Millás, 2004: 37). He compares her to the main character in *La soledad era esto*. This smoker goes through an identity crisis that she resolves "when she realises what hashish represents and quits smoking," or when one of the main characters from *Dos mujeres en Praga* decides to tell the writer about her life as Nevenka does (Millás, 2004: 40).

In this sense, *Hay algo que no es como me dicen* is similar to his literature as its content and structure, or narrative style have all the characteristic elements of his fiction. This is evidenced at the beginning of the narrative, which Millás approaches as if it were a story: "This is the story of a sensible woman who after realising that everything she had been told was a lie, went to court denounced the acts and turned everything upside down" (Millás, 2004: 9). This also occurs in the outcome of *Hansel and Gretel*.

[...] if you ask me why it was worth writing this book, I would say because I have finally worked out the end to *Hansel and Gretel*, a tale that has haunted me since my childhood and in which I had to read in an edition, in which somebody had torn out the last pages. And it ends neither well nor poorly; it ends ordinarily, like almost everything in this life. (Millás, 2004: 202-203)

However, the novel is similar to his journalistic texts due to the extensive research and veracity that underpins it. Thus it is a hybrid work of these two disciplines where we can observe the most relevant characteristics of his writing style, in which identity takes on a crucial role in the plot of the story:

[...] Nevenka and I, who had never met with each other, found ourselves momentarily isolated within that group of four. Then she asked me why I wanted to tell her story. I referred to the arguments I had already made in the column "Nevenka" published in *El País* (the estrangement from her own people and perhaps from herself), but I finally added that I didn't know for sure that I hoped to find out as I wrote. Indeed, I also said that this was, on the other hand, my way of working, both when I was doing journalism and when I was writing literature, in the case that journalism and literature were different things (Millás, 2004: 36).

3.3. *Breaking with the status quo: towards a new interpretation of reality*

The reality depicted in *Hay algo que no es como me dicen* is fragmented into two planes that recall the allegory of the Platonic cave⁵. The first of these planes is based on conventional reality. It is a space composed of pre-established norms and behaviours, i.e., of shadows and appearances, in which identity is shaped by imitating and assimilating these patterns. An alternative plane

5 Other authors have examined the relationship between Millás texts and the platonic cave myth. We find Carter Smith's investigation called "Like Prisoners in a Cave: A Problematic Search for Identity and Truth in Two Peninsular Novels" (2012), in which he studies the fiction work *El Orden alfabético* (1998). Moreover, we find Teresa González Arce's work, "Periodismo, ficción y realidad: a propósito de *Todo son preguntas*, *El ojo de la cerradura* y *Sombras sobre sombras* de Juan José Millás" (2008: 91-92), in which she analyses three collections of articles by the author: "Plato said, as we know, the world is a big cave in which the shadows of the sensible forms that existed outside were projected. For Millás, the universe did function not only this way but also every one of its inhabitants "I understood," we read in the prologue to *Sombras sobre sombras*, "that none of us is anything else: dark chambers in which the images of the world penetrate, in turn, trapped in a larger darker chamber" [...]"

contrasts with this world, composed of approaches alien to these conventionalisms, which can be accessed gradually and through a complex process, whose outcome is a new personal narrative.

Transitioning from one sphere to another is not easy: the people who are willing to undergo this transformation will be socially excluded, facing repercussions that will vary according to the period when it occurs, as indicated by the author: “it can range from going to prison to being hanged, being fined, going into exile, isolation, public scorn or being uprooted [...]” (Millás, 2021). This is explicit in Nevenka’s story, as her denunciation leads to a deep rift between her and her environment: “They could not stand that the victim abandoned her role as a victim because it threw everything out of place in people’s heads and reality” (Millás, 2004: 19).

Millás’s dichotomy between one place and another is reproduced throughout the reading. All the characters are affected by this as they must decide on the side they are going to take, whether they are in favour of or against the main character: “Her parents indeed took her side unconditionally once the report was formalised, but they are still living on the other side of that reality” (Millás, 2004: 82). Many of those who chose the conventional sphere were not interested in finding out the truth. Still, Nevenka’s experience could impact social organisation, so they adopted a posture of being comfortable and automatism. On the other hand, others would start their transition alongside her as they tried to prove the veracity of her testimony as far as possible.

This duality also extends to the rhetoric between opposing terms such as prudence and foolishness, delirium and sanity, or logic and irrationality, which the writer uses to question the normative frameworks in force. For example, while for many the sensible thing to do “was to resign and forget about it” (Millás, 2004: 94), for Nevenka, this kind of wisdom was an affront to her dignity, as she preferred recklessness to restraint: “Nevenka said ‘this is the final straw, I will never be sensible again, and so she went to court, denounced the events and turned everything upside down” (Millás, 2004: 116).

However, the main character’s attitude does not remain consistent. Instead, it varies as events unfold. We must consider that Álvarez’s harassment begins subtly so that the councillor normalises it: “Ismael Álvarez, would, for example, call Nevenka to discuss a work matter and at the end of the meeting, he would say: “Well, let’s go for a coffee.” Who would refuse to have coffee with a superior and not be called crazy?” (Millás, 2004: 158-159). However, this behaviour becomes increasingly repetitive and visible as time goes on, and the councillor becomes aware of the seriousness of the situation. Even so, she initially adopted a passive role that led her to remain silent for months, until she would finally embark on a process whereby she would question her role up until that point: [...] the doctor asked her if she had heard of something called sexual harassment and Nevenka thought that it only happened in films, and not even in serious films, but in soap operas. She could not be the victim of a soap opera (Millás, 2004: 55).

This is when the individuals who harass others at the forefront of reality begin to preserve their hegemony. First of all, Ismael Álvarez was the perpetrator. The main character would suffer her harasser’s abuse, as he attempted to maintain his position of power by controlling her: “As she freed herself from the emotional ties of the past, he increased the number of threatening calls trying to make her return to her submissive state” (Millás, 2004: 129-130). Those around her also denounced her attitude, as they preferred to uphold the known discourse rather than enter the unknown and unconventional universe that Nevenka

defends: "It was within this atmosphere where Nevenka's voice acquired, despite its fragility, an unexplainable value, as if every time she uttered a word a glass would shatter" (Millás, 2004: 13).

Specifically, people responded in two main ways; one of those was indifference. Some characters preferred to ignore her situation rather than accept the contradictions in their world: - "Do you know what you have done?- But do you know what he has done to me?- replied Nevenka confused.- I don't know anything, I don't know anything! Nothing (Millás, 2004: 18). In contrast, others manipulated reality so that it worked in their favour. This is evidenced in many witnesses' statements, who claimed that the councillor "was talking too much" (Millás, 2004: 26), although she hardly had any interviews with the media.

However, the most reiterated argument to disparage her was delirium. Considering that Álvarez "represented normality" in her society (Millás, 2004: 28), Nevenka fell outside the notion that defined the ordinary, so any words she uttered were invalidated and deemed to be the result of an illness or madness. Even so, she stood her ground, as she was convinced that "nothing was as she had been told. Everything was a pack of lies that she had contributed to until she said no" (Millás, 2004: 117).

3.4. *Nevenka's delirium*

In Millás' narrative universes, "anomalies, ruptures, and transgressions in the official version of reality predominate, protagonised by human beings who neither see nor understand what they are supposed to see and understand" (Ródenas, 2016). His characters experience a delirium enabling the author to criticise the connotations of the notion of *normality* used to delimit behaviours, corporealities, or circumstances. What responds to the established limits is accepted and validated by society, while an outlier of this framework is labelled as strange, deviant, or ambiguous. This conviction of difference makes human beings attempt to resemble each other rather than distinguish themselves from their peers, making them unconsciously take on behavioural patterns.

On the contrary, Millás defends the idea of diversity in his texts. To this end, dissidents like Nevenka are given a voice, whose testimony dismantles the architecture of the world where she had belonged. This leads to a general state of confusion that prompts many individuals in her environment to find arguments that would disarticulate her discourse and make her give in; one of the most prominent arguments in this sense is that she was delirious.

Ismael Álvarez is one of the characters that most uses "crazy" to refer to Nevenka. The Ponferrada councillor uses madness as an excuse when he feels a loss of control. To appease his victim, he tries to alter the perception of her surroundings, making her doubt the harassment, so she does not try to escape his control. He constantly and subtly does this throughout the story. It serves to generate confusion in the young woman: "Ismael Álvarez called her everything under the sun. He told her she was crazy ("you're not right in the head Quenka" was one of his favourite phrases), he had said it so many times that Nevenka herself had thought that she had lost her mind" (Millás, 2004: 51).

Other characters, including her family members, also use delirium to justify the protagonist's decisions. Specifically, Nevenka's alienation from reality is explained through three causes to foster a new interpretation of her world: drugs, joining a sect, and an eating disorder. They all stem from the same cause: mental derangement.

To make matters worse, she realised that they really believed that she was a drug addict, Anorexic, and crazy: the perfect scapegoat to use as a rubbish bin. They could put everything they detested about themselves in it and remain more or less happily in that perfect world. (Millás, 2004: 82)

However, as the author indicates, the drugs, particularly anxiolytics and antidepressants, eating disorders, or strange behaviours, resulted from a relentlessly abusive situation that she suffered from and was not the cause of, as some claim. Nevenka used sedatives as an escape outlet because accepting her position as a victim, together with the social exclusion to which she was subjected, are difficult circumstances to assimilate. Rather than trying to understand the reasons why she was in that situation, she initially used these methods so as “not to think because when she thought about how she had got into that situation, she would go crazy” (Millás, 2004: 76). For these reasons, she even admits to being mad: “If they tell me I am mad-thought Nevenka-, I will ask them to lock me up, to medicate me so this nightmare will end” (Millás, 2004: 52).

Nevenka only accepts that she is a victim and thus her sanity when her psychiatrist gives her a term for the problem she is experiencing: “sexual harassment.” Her psychiatrist diagnoses her with anxiety due to this situation and confirms the consistency and validity of her testimony. The psychiatrist’s report thus becomes “her ID” (Millás, 2004: 66), encouraging her to evolve and leave behind all the ideas, behaviours, and opinions associated with her past.

In this way, the theme of the power of words to modify our perception is introduced by Millás. The author reflects on the capacity words have to perpetuate systems of power, at the same time that they can manifest other representations of reality that challenge this pre-established regime of belief as is the case in *Hay algo que no es como me dicen*, as he does in his other literary and journalistic works.

La mujer loca (2014) is another example of this. It is a novel whose main character Julia cannot perceive language ordinarily. For her, “it is not a tool that serves us, but a tyranny that restricts us” (Ródenas, 2016). This character’s reflections are coherent and accurate. However, they go beyond the imposed normativity. As the book’s title indicates, the character is labelled a “madwoman.

The term harassment is observed in Nevenka’s case. While she had previously rejected the term and associated it with “defenceless women,” she later accepts that it applies to her, since it accurately describes her experience (Millás, 2004: 89). She finds this new meaning by reading books like *Acoso Moral* by Marie-France Hirigoyen. She has conversations with other women, like the one she has with her political rival Charo Velasco: or her psychiatrist Alfonso’s Hurtado’s diagnosis. Thus she recognises the words and their meanings, which pushes her to continue to be estranged, she begins to see the familiar as strange, and the odd as natural: “Nevenka Fernández begins to change her relationship with words, which are now ordered in a new way, forming constellations in her consciousness that illuminate a new universe” (Millás, 2004: 128).

3.5. *Estrangement as a denouncement in Hay algo que no es como me dicen*

Estrangement is an artistic and literary process that transforms the familiar into the alien and forms the basis of Millás’ writing. For this author, making the reader take on an alternative vision of their world is one of his literary and journalistic narratives’ primary goals. Therefore, we can establish different interconnections between works through the content of his texts:

[...] it is a question of seeing every day to illuminate it in such a way that the familiar becomes strange. I believe that one of the obligations of literature is to defamiliarise us with what is familiar because it is precisely how trivial events acquire meaning. (Iglesia, 2017)

Estrangement comprises the main plot in *Hay algo que no es como me dicen*. This non-fiction novel focuses on the story of a character for whom the ordinary has lost its meaning. Through her experience, Nevenka disarticulates her previous referential gender roles and the education that she had inherited from her family environment. This is the reason why the author himself defines the story as “the story of estrangement” (Millás, 2004: 25):

For example, her father had always referred pejoratively to homosexuals, but during her student days in Madrid, Nevenka had a homosexual friend who was a charming, supportive and fair person. For example, she had always heard in her house that if someone smoked a joint, they were a hopeless drug addict, but she saw her classmates smoke joints, and they kept studying, went to mass, and attended to all their obligations. For example, she had been brought up with the idea that a woman who slept with two different men was a nymphomaniac, and she had had ordinary classmates who had done so without ending up in a brothel. (Millás, 2004: 117)

The protagonist becomes estranged from her parents when she tells them about the situation until she formalises the report. When her daughter tells them about the harassment she had suffered, they prefer to reject her story rather than accept the basis of the world in which they live. This creates a conflict between them and Nevenka, as they live in different spheres of reality where communication is practically impossible:

a) [...] the estrangement that she felt in the house was also transferred to her parents. They did not understand anything; they did not realise that if she had left the Town Hall like that, she would have nowhere to go [...] she understood that she was alone, completely alone, and that she was also unable to explain how that situation had come about because it had been a subtle process, full of acts whose true dimension could not be understood if they were not properly articulated and she was unable to articulate them at that time, in the kitchen in that strange house, in the presence of those parents who had begun to seem strange (Millás, 2004: 67).

b) She barely spoke to her parents. She had cut off ties with them. They had made an analysis that kept their world safe, although it condemned their daughter, and they were convinced that Nevenka had gone mad when it was evident that the real world was going mad. Nevenka had belonged to that crazy world that she was distancing herself, from which she was breaking away without having another world that would take her in (Millás, 2004: 77).

Estrangement is so crucial that Millás dedicates an entire chapter to deeply analyzing this phenomenon; it is the eleventh chapter, which is called “Dates that do not add up.” The author reviews different events in Nevenka's life to discover when her biography starts to be associated with estrangement. It then becomes clear that there were various events in which the protagonist felt alienated from her reality. Before Ismael, she discovered that everything that they had told her about herself and her origins was not true:

Nevenka is 15 years old [...] she has found a box with family photos that she takes the time to look through to kill time [...] she is astonished to find her parents' wedding date and her birthdate do not match. According to the book, she was born two months

after the wedding, an incomprehensible and undoubtedly scandalous event in Ponferrada in the seventies, whose customs had not evolved at the same pace as the rest of the country (Millás, 2004: 109).

Therefore, Nevenka “had been conceived out of wedlock” (Millás, 2004: 109); that is, she had defied Ponferrada’s moral laws from the time of her birth. In the author’s words, this was the inaugural lie since it was followed by other moments that annulled the values she had been taught in her upbringing.

In this way, she concludes that life was not as they had told her it was; what she had thought to be reality was nothing more than a pack of lies and appearances, and the truth lied outside those representations. This drove her to ignore the discordant voices that encouraged her not to report the harassment and to regain the power to decide what she wanted in life: “The option that everyone suggested to her of denouncing when she was well when she had another life was absurd. The condition to build another life was to leave the windows of the previous one closed” (Millás, 2004: 123).

Millás goes so far as to compare the process the protagonist undergoes with Jack Lemon’s role in *Missing* to convey her change in mentality to the reader. Like Ed Horman ⁶, the main character in the film, the councillor goes from being one of them to becoming a victim of the very culture that she used to defend; this transformation comes about at the end of the novel:

In England, despite the harshness of the environment, Nevenka found a kind of peace that she did not know existed. She tells such a well-constructed story of those months that it feels as if she had told it to herself a hundred times before telling me. Wrexham remains as a mythical space in her memory where she finally met, face to face, the Nevenka who, from somewhere deep inside of herself, had been telling her: There is something that is not as I am told it is (Millás, 2004: 182-183).

Nevenka Fernández is an archetypal character in Juan José Millás’ narrative. Although she is a woman whose story is based on true events, she can be compared to other protagonists from his novels. Like them, she rejects the pre-established moulds in favour of a new, more honest, and reliable identity. Readers also question how they have constructed their own ideology, behaviours, and attitudes, applying the councillor’s process of estrangement to themselves. In short, Nevenka’s testimony is a tribute to authenticity that encourages Millás’ audiences to claim that there is something that is not as it seems, despite what they are told.

4. Conclusions

1. Throughout his career, Juan José Millás has developed hybrid texts that combine the journalistic principles with narrative tools typical of his fiction, thus converting him into one of the leading exponents of Spanish literary journalism. The most representative case is his work *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: el caso Nevenka Fernández contra la realidad*, which is his first non-fiction novel. He demonstrates his ability as an investigative journalist and elevates it to literary work through rhetorical and poetic resources that shape his differentiated style.

⁶ “At first, the character cannot believe what she sees or hears each time she goes to gather information. She even innocently denounces the outrage, until she realises what has happened to her son in Pinochet’s Chile is the norm and his moral bewilderment the exception” (Millás, 2004: 28).

2. The theme of identity is revealed as one of Millás' most common characteristics in his works, whether journalistic or literary. The author shows how what we understand as a pre-established social pact aims to delimit individuals' behaviours, ideas, and inclinations. It is an unjust system that marginalises anyone who rejects, ignores, or crosses these established boundaries.
3. The protagonists from Juan José Millás stories are characters who contradict these conventions. Such is the case of Nevenka Fernández, who, although at first responds to the prototype of a conventional young woman, manages to break away from the social structure that she lives in. Nevenka sets out on a life journey to discern which thoughts are hers and which are a part of this social contract due to the repeated episodes of sexual harassment she had suffered. The notion of estrangement is fundamental to achieving this goal, and it describes the protagonist's perception of one reality compared to another. This estrangement not only appears in *Hay algo que no es como me dicen* but is also a stylistic hallmark of the author's writing, as researchers such as Sobejano (1992) and Ródenas (2006) have pointed out.
4. Nevenka concludes her process of estrangement by publicly and judicially denouncing her harasser. Despite being a victim, she does not imagine being considered the perpetrator. This is common among Millás' characters because they do not respond to the rules of this social pact; they are the targets of all kinds of accusations in order to maintain the hegemony of their world. Among the most common arguments used to justify these changes in thinking is alienation. Through estrangement, Millás reflects on the conception of madness in his texts, a concept that has been used to correct and dominate individuals by the powers that be.
5. The author does not only construct his novels, reports, and columns to entertain the audience. Millás aims to make his texts change the reader's perspective that overturns certain arbitrary structures and directly affects specific areas of their lives. Therefore, by reading Millás' stories, readers can empathise with the protagonists and bring about their own process of estrangement that his characters also experience.

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