

Article

The Mater Dolorosa: Spanish Diva Lola Flores as Spokesperson for Francoist Oppressive Ideology

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Abstract: This article critically examines the star persona of Lola Flores, an iconic Spanish flamenco artist, within the historical and political context of Francoist Spain (1939–1975). It argues that Flores’s carefully constructed star image not only persisted into post-Franco Spain but also served as a covert vehicle for the continued propagation of National-Falangist Catholic ideology. The article primarily focuses on two major productions: the book *Lola en carne viva. Memorias de Lola Flores* (1990) and the television series *El coraje de vivir* (1994). Both portray a linear and cohesive version of her life from childhood to her later years, carefully curated to defend and rehabilitate her image. While many view Flores as a self-made artist, the article argues that her star persona was a deliberate construct—shaped by Suevia Films, a major Francoist-era film studio, and media narratives that aligned her with traditional gender roles, Catholic values, and Spanish nationalism. Despite emerging in post-Franco Spain, Flores’s narrative does not mark a rupture from the ideological frameworks of the past. Instead, it repackages Francoist values—particularly those surrounding patriarchal gender norms, suffering, and the glorification of sacrifice—to ensure her continued relevance. Suevia Films (1951) played a significant role in shaping her star persona as a symbol of Spanish folklore, aligning her with Francoist ideals of nation, Catholic morality, and submissive femininity. Her image was used to promote Spain internationally as a welcoming and culturally rich destination. Her persona fit within Franco’s broader strategy of using flamenco and folklore to attract foreign tourism while maintaining tight ideological control over entertainment. Flores’s life is framed as a rags-to-riches story, which reinforces Social Spencerist ideology (a social Darwinist perspective) that hard work and endurance lead to success, rather than acknowledging systemic oppression under Francoism. Her personal struggles—poverty, romantic disappointments, accusations of collaboration with the Franco regime, and tax evasion—are framed as necessary trials that strengthen her character. This aligns with the Catholic ideal of redemptive suffering, reinforcing her status as the mater dolorosa (Sorrowful Mother) figure. This article highlights the contradictions in Flores’s gender performance—while she embodied passion and sensuality in flamenco, her offstage identity conformed to the submissive, self-sacrificing woman idealized by the Francoist Sección Femenina (SF). Even in her personal life, Flores’s narrative aligns with Francoist values—her father’s bar, La Fe de Pedro Flores, symbolizes the fusion of religion, nationalism, and traditional masculinity. Tico Medina plays a key role by framing *Lola en carne viva* as an “authentic” and unfiltered account. His portrayal is highly constructed, acting as her “defense lawyer” to counter criticisms. Flores’s autobiography is monologic—it suppresses alternative perspectives, ensuring that her version of events remains dominant and unquestioned. Rather than acknowledging structural oppression, the narrative glorifies suffering as a path to resilience, aligning with both Catholic doctrine and Francoist propaganda. The article ultimately deconstructs Lola Flores’s autobiographical myth, demonstrating that her public persona—both onstage and offstage—was a strategic construction that perpetuated Francoist ideals well beyond the dictatorship. While her



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image has been celebrated as a symbol of Spanish cultural identity, it also functioned as a tool for maintaining patriarchal and nationalist ideologies under the guise of entertainment.

Keywords: Lola Flores; *Lola en carne viva*. *Memorias de Lola Flores*; *El coraje de vivir*; *mater dolorosa*; monologue and framing techniques; authoritarianism; folklore

1. Introduction: The Strategic Construction of Lola Flores's Myth

Tico Medina's *Lola en carne viva*. *Memorias de Lola Flores* (*Lola in Living Flesh*) (1990), and *El coraje de vivir* (*The Courage to Live*) (Flores 1994a, 1994b, 1994c), a four-part television series produced by Luis Sanz Santiago for the private channel Antena 3, are both framed and presented to Spanish audiences as the “authentic” autobiography of María Dolores Flores Ruiz (1923–1995), better known as the internationally renowned flamenco singer, dancer, and actress Lola Flores. Both the book and the TV series have shaped the public's understanding of Flores's life and identity. Both have been replicated in numerous documentaries, homages, movies, encyclopedias, cultural and academic studies, and book-length biographies. According to Alberto Romero Ferrer, who won the Manuel Alvar Prize for Humanistic Studies in 2016 with his essay *Lola Flores. Cultura popular, memoria sentimental e historia del espectáculo* (2016), all these “reports, interviews and documentaries for television, [...] biography books, society press, etc. . .” constitute a powerful “testimony” of the significance of the star's character in representing the cultural memory of all Spanish people. However, he adds, this memory “of all Spaniards” has been forgotten due to “ideological, historical and cultural prejudices” derived from the consideration, particularly rampant in the 1970s, of Flores's identity “as a product of the most recalcitrant [Francisco] Franco regime and, more recently, as a product of gossip magazines and social entertainment” (14, 294).¹

Here I refer to both *Lola en carne viva* and *El coraje* as Flores's 1990s autobiographical narrative. While these two versions do not necessarily include exactly the same events or episodes, and there are some differences between them, their overall narrative framework remains consistent: both versions are presented from a single, cohesive perspective, structured around similar events that follow the same linear progression from Flores's birth to the present, when she is already a grandmother suffering from a cancer diagnosed in 1972, and a high-profile artist who has been facing significant challenges especially since the death of Francisco Franco, the dictator who ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975. In her 1990s narrative (that is, in both the book and the TV program), these challenges refer to various allegations, such as her success being tied to her collaboration with the Franco regime; her adoption of gypsy identity, despite not being of gypsy descent; her selling the exclusive rights of her mother's death; her splurge of millions in Madrid's Casino of the Carretera de la Coruña—where, argues Flores, “I must admit I go from time to time, although it is not my second home, as has been written” (Medina 1990, p. 311); and her tax evasion, in one of the most publicized cases of financial impropriety by a celebrity in twentieth century Spain.

Reasonably, these allegations casted serious doubts on the authenticity and integrity of her legacy as *Lola de España*, the symbol of Spain's cultural identity. By deconstructing the implicit assumptions and ideological frameworks embedded in her 1990s narrative, I aim to demonstrate that this narrative is produced with the strategic purpose of rehabilitating her image as *Lola de España* while still covertly supporting the National-Falangist Catholic ideology imposed during the Franco regime and the *Sección Femenina* (SF), the women's branch of the *Falange Española* led by Pilar Primo de Rivera. Although written in post-Franco Spain, this autobiography does not mark a rupture from the star persona Flores

embodied during the Francoist era. On the contrary, I argue that it serves not only as a continuation but as a reinforcement of the same star persona, ensuring that it remains intact despite the shifting political and cultural landscape.

In 1951, Flores signed an exclusive contract with Suevia Films, one of the most important film studios of the Francoist era.² The majority of the films produced by the studio aligned with the regime's ideological goals of propagating nationalism, traditional gender roles, and Catholic morality.³ The suspicion that Flores's star persona was the studio's creation began to gain traction after Franco's death. However, this suspicion has yet to be proven, as no one has critically examined her autobiography as a construction or myth. During the dictatorship, film and media were tightly controlled, reinforcing the idea of Flores as a symbol of Spanish folklore. The persistence of these narratives made later revisionism more challenging. Flores was widely celebrated as an authentic icon of Spanish culture, making it difficult to separate the myth from the reality without challenging deeply held cultural perceptions.

Most studies and media portrayals have focused on her artistry, charisma, and cultural impact, rather than deconstructing her myth as *Lola de España*. Biographers such as Juan Ignacio García-Garzón (2005) and Ferrer concede that her star persona is indeed a myth. However, they shift the authorship of this myth away from Suevia Films, attributing it to Flores herself. Garzón declares "I am convinced that she [Flores] was a woman who invented herself and who [...] managed to make the leap to stardom through her own merits and she was not ashamed to admit it" (16). Similarly, Ferrer describes Flores's myth as a "self-construction", portraying her as a "strong and defiant" artist who constantly had to overcome "a new obstacle, a new test, another challenge", in a career that was "full of difficulties" but from which she "would always know how to emerge victorious, time and time again" (275-6). This raises an important question: if the suspicion that Flores's star persona was originally constructed by Suevia Films has been so vehemently denied, how can I claim that this constructed persona remains unchanged in her 1990s autobiography? I argue that it is precisely her 1990s narrative that allows us to see this continuity: by offering a deconstructive analysis of the memories depicted in it, I demonstrate that these recollections are deliberately crafted to rehabilitate the myth constructed by Suevia Films. This purpose is achieved by reframing Flores as an embodiment of the *mater dolorosa* ideal of redemptive suffering while still quietly justifying both the regime's National-Falangist Catholic ideology and the discrimination against individuals who do not conform to this ideology.

As part of its broader role in Francoist cultural production, Suevia Films had a vested interest in constructing the myth of Lola Flores, and used it to reinforce the patriarchal, Catholic, and nationalist ideals of the dictatorship while, at the same time, catering to more "progressive" international audiences to attract tourism and create economic benefits for both the entertainment industry and the country.⁴ Aligning with Francoist ideology, the studio positioned Flores as a self-made woman by manufacturing a meritocracy myth, which sought to downplay structural inequalities and promote the illusion that social mobility was accessible to those who remained loyal, disciplined, and hardworking under the regime. To market the star and transform her into the cinematic product (or brand) known as *Lola de España*, the studio crafted an autobiographical myth for her to perform across various media outlets. The myth replicated the typical model of the star autobiography as a heroic journey from rags to riches, a model "that had much of that literary discourse of the traditional hero or heroine, who builds their destiny by overcoming a series of obstacles of every kind" (Ferrer 2016, p. 90). This meritocratic journey from rags to riches fostered the belief that Flores was a self-made artist who achieved stardom solely through her individual hard work, determination, innate musical talent, and charisma.

This portrayal aligns with Social Spencerism, a framework derived from Herbert Spencer, whose work *Principles of Biology* appeared in 1864. In this work, Spencer introduced the concept of the “struggle for survival” to describe the process by which organisms best adapted to their environment survive and reproduce, while less-adapted organisms tend to die out. He extended this biological principle to social and economic systems, suggesting that struggle or competition within people always results in the “strongest” individuals or groups rising to prominence.⁵ The Francoist rhetoric that hard work, not systemic change, leads to success aligned with the ideology of Social Spencerism. Therefore, instead of acknowledging the systemic inequalities that limited social mobility under Francoism, Flores’s meritocracy myth reinforced the regime’s narrative that Spain was a land of opportunity rather than oppression. Poverty was depicted not as oppression but as an honorable trial that strengthened Flores’s moral character. Instead of highlighting the discrimination faced by marginalized people such as the Roma community, Flores’s myth implied that those who persist through adversity demonstrate their superiority, legitimizing their success as a result of their ability to endure. The myth was not merely created to justify Flores’s struggles but to actively transform them into proof of her exceptionalism, reinforcing both the Catholic glorification of redemptive suffering and the Social Spencerist idea that only the strongest deserve to succeed.

In her 1990s autobiography, Flores does not acknowledge the fact that her star persona was shaped by Suevia Films as part of Francoist propaganda: obviously, this would have gone against her purpose of rehabilitating her persona, ensuring that her legacy as *Lola de España* remains intact. Rather than expose the meritocracy myth crafted by Suevia Films, the best way to defend her persona from the accusations voiced against her is to expand it, incorporating the accusations, though framing them as yet another obstacle in her heroic journey from rags to riches, thus reinforcing her status as *Lola de España*, the ultimate survivor. Instead of dismantling the meritocracy myth, her strategy consists in embracing it, fitting in it the accusations, though not as wrongdoings but as inescapable tests that further ascertain her resilience, suffering, and sacrifice.

Suevia Films had already constructed her star image as a self-made woman who rose from poverty through innate talent, individual effort, and perseverance. By integrating the accusations while underscoring that even at the height of celebrity, her moral character is still being tested, Flores turns guilt into victimhood, proving that her journey never truly ends: enduring the continuous suffering of inevitable trials is the hidden cost of her success. This strategic move humanizes her and strengthens the romanticized image of the tormented yet triumphant artist. It deepens the emotional connection with her audience, who sees her as a relentless fighter. By framing the accusations as part of her struggle to survive as *Lola de España*, her narrative ensures that her hardships mirror those of the Spanish people. It taps into collective identity and nostalgia, making her not just a celebrity, but a national emblem of resilience. By expanding the meritocracy myth, her narrative shifts the audience attention away from the actual accusations and onto her story of individual struggle, allowing her to sidestep the storm while still silently propagating Francoist values.

In her 1990s autobiography, Flores’s journey from rags to riches is framed as a series of hardships, emphasizing suffering and sacrifice as essential to her artistic success. However, she carefully avoids presenting herself as a martyr until the final chapters. By interweaving moments of support, joy, and triumph, she ensures that admiration—rather than pity—defines her legacy, reinforcing her image as a resilient and triumphant figure. This study will focus exclusively on the episodes depicting her hardships in her offstage private life, highlighting a key shift in how suffering is framed. As a child, Flores’s struggles are primarily material, shaped by poverty in Jerez and Seville. As an adult, however, her

suffering is redefined, moving from economic deprivation to emotional and romantic turmoil following her family's relocation to Madrid. Flores imposes a specific narrative framework onto her adult life, confining her offstage persona within the myth of passionate, idealized love. This framework, however, directly contradicts the values of the SF, which promoted moderation, self-restraint, and selflessness as the defining traits of femininity. The myth of romantic love, rooted in emotional intensity and unbridled passion, was fundamentally at odds with the SF's emphasis on "emotional sacrifice, temperance, and control of passion"—values central to Francoist gender ideology: "These emotional styles and practices had nothing to do with those the Falangists were striving so hard to impose" (Barrera 2021, pp. 265, 275).

Like the SF, the Francoist era's feminist movements also opposed the model of romantic love, but for different reasons. Feminists argued that it perpetuated gender stereotypes and unequal power dynamics, positioning women as passive, nurturing, and dependent on men for validation and fulfillment. They critiqued idealized love as a patriarchal tool, reinforcing women's worth through their ability to attract and retain male affection. Additionally, they highlighted how this emphasis on passionate love marginalized non-heteronormative relationships and alternative expressions of intimacy. In contrast to this model, postwar feminists such as the writer Carmen Laforet (1921–2004) depicted healthy love as one liberated from imposed gender roles, based on mutual respect, trust, and open communication. Laforet's story *El piano* (1952) presents a romantic relationship in which both partners feel emotionally safe, valued, and supported, fostering individual and collective growth (Mizrahi 2011).

In contrast, passionate love demands total emotional surrender, prioritizing the relationship above personal identity or social responsibilities. Such relationships often feature boundary violations, unhealthy conflicts, and power imbalances, where one partner exerts control or dominance over the other. Instead of fostering security and emotional fulfillment, passionate love tends to create dependency, instability, and even harm, both psychological and physical. While feminists rejected both passionate and traditional love models, the SF constructed its own alternative, sharply at odds with both. The SF upheld marriage not as a source of fulfillment or passion but as a social and religious duty, where women's primary roles were motherhood and homemaking rather than romantic companionship. Chastity, obedience, and loyalty were emphasized over personal happiness, reinforcing the idea that a woman's virtue lay in her ability to suppress desire and submit to the moral and social order imposed by the patriarchal regime.

In her 1990s autobiography, Flores frames herself as a profound believer in the myth of ideal love. This gives the impression that she is prone to fall ardently in love-at-first-sight, particularly with the gypsy men who are portrayed as brilliant flamenco artists yet also as dangerously seductive and emotionally volatile. She describes herself as acutely aware of the risk and inevitable suffering these relationships could bring, yet also as unable to control her passionate impulses. This produces the sensation that her suffering is not a result of these men's actions but rather a consequence of her own failure to restrain her emotions. Romantic disappointments and sufferings are presented as "natural" to the viewer because they are framed as inevitable, rather than as consequences of male betrayal or structural gender imbalances. Flores portrays herself as both aware of the dangers of passionate love and powerless to resist them, reinforcing the idea that romantic suffering is not imposed upon her but rather an unavoidable outcome of her own excess of feeling. This framing removes blame from the men in her life, presenting them as fiery, instinct-driven artists whose unpredictability is simply part of their nature, while positioning Flores's suffering as a necessary and expected consequence of failing to control her emotions.

By depicting heartbreak as a “natural” disciplinary mechanism, Flores aligns with the Catholic-Francoist ideology that valorized female suffering as a path to spiritual and moral purification. Romantic pain becomes a rite of passage, teaching her to domesticate her passions and embrace the self-denial expected of women. Through this suffering, she ultimately conforms to the archetype of the *mater dolorosa*—the enduring, self-sacrificing mother figure whose virtue lies in accepting pain with grace. Her transformation is not framed as an act of repression but as a noble journey of emotional mastery, reinforcing the SF’s ideal of the morally pure, dutiful woman. This perspective is further emphasized by the symbolic weight of her name, “Lola”, derived from María Dolores (Mary of Sorrows), evoking the Virgin Mary’s suffering during Christ’s Passion. In this way, her personal story is mythologized, aligning her with the broader national narrative of Spanish womanhood under Francoism, where female suffering was glorified as an expression of devotion, strength, and higher purpose. By framing her emotional struggles in this way, Flores’s narrative transcends individual experience, becoming a culturally sanctioned lesson in feminine endurance and sacrifice.

Flores’s 1990s autobiography is also a commercial and ideological narrative construct, as I will show, building on the work of influential film and media scholars such as [Dyer \(1979, 1986, 1997\)](#) and [McDonald \(2000\)](#), whose contributions focus on star studies, media representation, and the construction of identity in film and popular culture. When I refer to Flores, I am actually referring to her star persona, the narrator of her 1990s autobiography. Rather than assuming the star is simply telling her unmediated personal truth or her self-constructed myth, I critically assess her 1990s autobiography. This assessment allows me to demonstrate how her narrative purposely redeploys strategies previously employed by the studio, such as framing and monologue, to quietly control the audience’s perception and rehabilitate her myth as *Lola de España*. Framing is a communication method that has been studied extensively across disciplines, particularly in communication, sociology, psychology, and media studies (i.e., [Goffman 1974](#); [Entman 1993](#); [Lakoff 2004](#); [Iyengar 1991](#); [Gamson and Modigliani 1989](#); [Gitlin 1980](#); [Kahneman and Tversky 2000](#)). As illustrated above, framing involves presenting information in a particular way to alter how people understand the context or meaning of the information presented. Framing strives to guide the audience to adopt a specific viewpoint, attitude, or emotion by emphasizing certain aspects of an identity, issue, or event while downplaying or omitting others.

Here, I examine the framing techniques employed by both Flores and journalist Tico Medina, who appears as the author of *Lola en carne viva*, to show how Medina plays a crucial role in legitimizing Flores’s autobiography, repeatedly framing it as “authentic” to present her life as a raw, unfiltered account rather than a constructed narrative. Medina’s role is to reinforce the illusion of spontaneity by positioning himself as a neutral transcriber, making her narrative appear unmediated and resistant to critique. In the prologue, he minimizes his own voice, stating he will only intervene “very briefly” to provide “footnote annotations” (22), which quietly serve to validate and amplify Flores’s myth as a reality rather than a patriarchal simulacrum, illusion, or “ghost born from the male imagination”, as Flores’s myth has been defined by the writer Francisco [Umbral \(1987, p. 18\)](#). Medina frames Flores’s life as a journey of suffering and perseverance, and preemptively disarms critics by emphasizing Flores’s sincerity, as questioning her sincerity would seem like dismissing her suffering.⁶

Symbolically acting as her “defense lawyer”, Medina structures the autobiography as a defense argument, addressing the accusations against her, though only in the final chapters. This allows Flores to reinforce her meritocratic myth before presenting the accusations, transforming them into yet another hardship she has to endure rather than misdeeds for which she bears responsibility. Additionally, delaying the discussion of the accusations

until the final chapters insinuates that they represent a footnote in her life story. This placement minimizes their importance, supporting the idea that her legacy is shaped by her artistry and resilience rather than by public scrutiny or criticism. By the time readers reach the final chapters, they have already developed an emotional connection to her journey, making them more sympathetic to her perspective on the accusations as terribly unfair to her great sacrifices and service to the nation.⁷

As witnessed in both Flores's and other characters' gender and race portrayals, Flores's narrative is monologic: it presents a single, authoritative perspective that suppresses alternative viewpoints, rather than allowing for polyphony or multiple perspectives. This assertion is based on inspiration from feminist scholars, such as [Butler \(1990, 1993\)](#), [Crenshaw \(1989\)](#), and [Collins \(1990\)](#), who have demonstrated both that gender and race are constructs, rather than biological or fixed identities, and that these constructs often interact to create unique forms of discrimination and privilege. In her 1990s autobiography, Flores depicts herself as being "black as sin" (68), even though she is not black in the racial or cultural sense typically associated with people of African descent. Instead, her skin color reflects a Mediterranean olive complexion, which is common in Spain. By framing herself as a black woman, Flores not only performs an act of appropriation but also of racialization, the process by which individuals or groups are ascribed a racial identity through cultural, social, or political constructs that attribute fixed, essentialized traits to them. It often involves stereotyping and essentializing behaviors (i.e., passion, seduction, and emotional intensity), practices (i.e., flamenco, bullfighting, and nomadism) and physical features (i.e., dark hair, dark skin, or black eyes), linking them to perceived racial or ethnic categories. As [Dan Rodríguez-García \(2022\)](#) reminds us,

The fact is, any group is susceptible to being racialized, as the idea of race is a social construct—with fluid, cultural, and minority/majority components—that depends on the context. For this reason, the same person, for example, the actor Antonio Banderas, can be considered White in Spain (in Spain, this would be indisputable) while being labeled as a "person of color" by a number of news outlets in the United States.

Since Medina's role consists in legitimizing Flores's narrative, he confirms that she is "black, just looking at her told you so" (41), adding that people from Jerez's *Calle del sol* (or Sun Street)—where (supposedly) Flores was born—declare that as a child she was already "so black it was scary to look at her. But so beautiful, so beautiful, like a doll" (41). Medina emphasizes that this is exactly what he heard from "an old and fat gypsy woman" who was "fanning herself with a fan that read 'Licor del Mambo. Passion Fruit Juice'", while sitting in a chair "at the door of her house in the same Sun Street that still persists and is already called 'Lola Flores Street', as God commands" (41).

Medina's affirmations raise an inherent inconsistency: if Flores's "black" skin color is self-evident—"just looking at her told you so"—why does he feel the need to confirm it so emphatically? This rhetorical overcompensation reveals the tension in aligning Flores's identity with racialized imagery and constructed exoticism. In fact, Medina's comment about "mambo" and "passion fruit" indirectly situates Flores within a broader Afro-Caribbean and tropical aesthetic, exoticizing her even more by adding layers of sensuality and vibrancy to her manufactured identity. The mention of mambo, with its Afro-diasporic roots, and passion fruit, evoking sensuality, tropicality, and abundance, implicitly associates Flores to colonial fantasies of the "exotic other". In colonial and post-colonial contexts, black women were often depicted as symbols of untamed passion and sensuality, making their beauty both desirable and threatening. The expressions "so black it was scary" and "black as sin" subtly reinforce the idea that Flores's "exotic" attractive-

ness is transgressive and intimidating, challenging Francoist societal norms of femininity and propriety.

Flores's racialization intersects with the way in which she depicts herself as embodying two seemingly contradictory gender constructs: her gender performance in her flamenco shows and movies is framed as exotic, deeply passionate, and hypersexual. While this framing presents her as an alluring public spectacle, her gender behavior in her offstage private life is portrayed in a way that keeps her firmly within the boundaries of the regime's patriarchal and Christian morality, corroborating Carmen Martín Gaité's comment about Spanish artists, who "were very decent in their private life" (Martín Gaité 1987, p. 33). By evoking desire and exoticism while staging flamenco, her "black" body is transformed into an exotic, passionate, and erotic public spectacle, but her mind is furtively infused with Catholic morality, ensuring that her gender performance in her offstage existence reflects the submissive and self-sacrificing model of femininity dictated by the SF.

Flores's depiction of her onstage gender performances as exotic, untamed, emotionally intense, and hypersexual serves to produce the apparent impression that she is like Carmen, the racialized gypsy protagonist of Prosper Mérimée's romantic novella *Carmen* (1845), a character that inspired innumerable adaptations in various forms of cultural productions both internationally and in Spain. Over time, Carmen's character flattened into a stereotype symbolizing exoticism, passionate independence, irresistible charm, and danger: the predictable figure of the *femme fatale* as an object that provokes both fascination and patriarchal anxieties about women who defy societal norms. However, by framing her offstage gender performances in a manner that aligns with the SF's vision of the ideal woman—obedient, maternal, and devoted to family and nation—Flores veiledly continues to present her star persona as Suevia Films crafted it: as a safely consumable entertaining product, rather than one that threatens the rigid gender, race, and class hierarchies imposed by the Franco regime. Her sensuality, passion, and excess are framed as an act, as something that exists only within the context of public performance, distancing it from her "real" identity. These onstage, offstage framings ultimately insinuate the idea that her "true self" aligns with the Francoist ideal of womanhood. This contrast serves to separate her public identity as a performer, which is permissible *only* as part of her professional role, from her private identity as a virtuous, suffering, and enduring woman, which remains intact despite her flamboyant stage presence.⁸

To understand the monologic structure of Flores's narrative, we need to become aware of how it is mainly grounded on the characters' constructed gender performances. For example, the relationship between Flores's parents Pedro and Rosario is shaped following the model of the ideal Francoist patriarchal couple. Flores's narrative structures their relationship around hierarchy, duty, and complementarity, romanticizing Rosario's submission and Pedro's control to ensure that Francoist patriarchal values remain unchallenged and self-perpetuating. The inequality of power in their relationship remains *invisible* because Flores frames their dynamic as "natural" rather than constructed. Instead of questioning Pedro's dominance or Rosario's subservience, she idealizes their marriage as a harmonious union, reinforcing the belief that traditional gender roles are intrinsic rather than imposed. By portraying Rosario as the perfect wife—self-sacrificing, obedient, and devoted—Flores presents patriarchy as a benevolent structure, rather than a system that perpetuates and limits women's autonomy. At the same time, Flores stigmatizes and penalizes characters who deviate from Francoist ideals of masculinity and femininity, framing them as morally deficient, emotionally unstable, or socially deviant. Women who fail to embody traditional feminine virtues are depicted as bitter, cursed, or dangerous. Men who fail to embody the ideal of the strong, protective patriarch are similarly diminished. By reinforcing these stereotypes, Flores not only legitimizes her parents' patriarchal model but also ensures that

those who reject or challenge it are framed as outcasts, rather than as individuals resisting an oppressive system.

Like most of the characters, Pedro and Rosario are racialized, a supposed fact that is constructed through the attribution of dark physical features. For example, Pedro has “stunning black eyes, a glory to behold” (35). Racialization also occurs in their association with cultural symbols such as flamenco, bullfighting, and itinerancy, which are presented as defining markers of Roma identity. This Roma identity embodied the “authentic” folkloric spirit of Spain in Francoist *españoladas*, a term commonly linked to various artistic and entertainment forms that essentialized Spanish identity, reducing complex cultural realities into easily consumable stereotypes. Garzón describes the 38 films starring Flores between 1940 and 1992 as *españoladas* filled with “the well-known and mercilessly repeated clichés, and that desperate emptiness of so, so many of her films” (309).⁹ Like the films starred by Flores, her autobiography reinforces an essentialist vision of Spanishness, where Andalusian culture is celebrated as “authentic” yet carefully controlled to align with nationalist narratives.

Flores’s parents are portrayed as hardworking individuals deeply rooted in flamenco tradition. Rosario is originally from “the lands of Sanlúcar, where so much is known about singing, dancing, and art” (31), while Pedro comes from Bollullos, “a land of excellent flamenco styles” (14). However, they are also depicted as apolitical: “we weren’t [...] neither right-wing nor left-wing [...], we lived with the people, we were the people” (99), modest: “humble, simple people” (87), discreet: knowing “how to remain silent when necessary” (34), and profoundly Catholic, embodying gender roles that align with Francoist ideals of masculinity and femininity. This representation of Flores’s parents as racialized yet industrious, deeply Catholic, and politically passive folkloric figures renders them “acceptable” for commodification in entertainment, tourism, and nationalist propaganda. The Franco regime sought to unify Spain under a rigid, hierarchical, and Catholic identity. By integrating racialized and exoticized Andalusians into this vision—so long as they behaved like ‘good people,’ upheld traditional gender roles, and adhered to Catholic values—the regime could claim cultural diversity without threatening its centralized authority.

Flores declares “I was born in Jerez, which is the land of great gypsies, I would say, the best, and in a neighborhood of good people, of gypsies, notably” (26). Despite appearances, she is not describing *all* the neighborhood’s gypsies as “good people”. The adjectives “great”, “best” clearly hint that she is not referring to all gypsies, but rather to those who were considered as “good gypsies” by the regime because they served the nation by entertaining tourists with their state-approved folkloric art. Flores herself admits to understanding that saying the “best gypsies” is “like saying the more artistic gypsies in the world” (54). Her narrative reflects the regime’s instrumentalization of the “good gypsies” to promote tourism under the guise of cultural integration, despite their ongoing discrimination and marginalization, exacerbated, back then, by policies (i.e., legal prohibitions on their language and customs) underpinned by racist ideologies.¹⁰

To reunify the population against a common enemy, after winning the Civil War, the Franco regime used the negative stereotype of the “criminal gypsy” promoted by 19th century anthropologists aligned with Social Spencerism, such as Cesare Lombroso and Rafael Salillas, as scapegoats to blame the gypsy people for the social problems affecting the nation (Rothea 2014, p. 12). The gypsies who did not conform to the National Catholic ideology were considered a threat to the regime and thus accused of “infecting and corrupting the national *demos*, the cleanliness, the whiteness, the Hispanic race, the rationalist *cogito*” (Periáñez Bolaño 2016, p. 12). Flores constantly emphasizes the “cleanliness” of both Rosario and Pedro—“people in clean white shirts [...], who are good at heart” (34)—and Pedro’s “clean and shiny” bars, implicitly admitting to understanding that these “good

people” represent the antithesis of the “bad gypsies”, the “internal others” whose voices are silenced or downgraded in her narrative. By structuring it in a way that punishes racialized and gender-nonconforming figures, Flores reinforces the Francoist racial and social order. This framing does not just erase structural inequalities—it also legitimizes them, ensuring that those who do not fit into the ideals of Francoist Spain are seen as inherently flawed rather than victims of systemic oppression.

Nacionalcatolicismo (or National Catholicism) functioned as a supremacist ideology by enforcing religious, cultural, and national dominance. It promoted Catholic, patriarchal, and authoritarian values as the only legitimate foundation for society, while excluding and repressing those who did not conform. Its fusion of Catholicism with Francoist nationalism created a hierarchical and exclusionary social order, making it a form of theocratic and cultural supremacy. Flores’s persona is monologic because her narrative imposes a rigid ideological framework in which her unstated *nacionalcatolicismo* appears fixed, inevitable, and morally correct. By structuring her narrative in a way that casts it as the *only* “natural” and valid ideology, her monologic persona functions as a method for controlling thought, feeling, and behavior, ensuring that her narrative aligns seamlessly with the regime’s heteronormative political agenda. Her persona embodies an unreliable narrator because this narrator cannot step out of its unspoken authoritarian perspective to see the world from the perspective of others. To echo Mikael Bakhtin’s words, there is “no presumption of a plurality of equally-valid consciousnesses, each with its own world” (7), in Flores’s autobiography because the thoughts, feelings, and actions of all the characters representing the individuals who belong to her *real* life, such as her parents, for example, are entirely filtered through her persona’s supremacist perspective, leaving no room for alternative voices or perspectives.

Like framing, monologue makes it difficult for recipients to critically approach Flores’s narrative, given that they do not encounter any overtly dissenting voices or perspectives in it. As a result, they come to accept her naturalized, hierarchical, and exclusionary perspective as the sole truth or “ultimate word” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 293). While monologue silences all other perspectives, the framing of her autobiography as experiences of suffering creates a superficial context that makes these painful experiences appear reasonable or even inevitable. These romanticized struggles serve both to shape her persona as the exemplary figure of the *mater dolorosa* and to justify or mask the propagation of Francoist oppressive ideals and the marginalization of non-conforming people. In the following sections, I discuss how Suevia Films’ framing and monologic techniques are strategically repurposed by Flores (that is, by her persona) to rehabilitate her image and, in parallel, continue to normalize Francoist gender and race hierarchies while quietly justifying the exclusion of those who deviate from her persona’s underlying supremacist beliefs.

2. Tico Medina’s and Flores’s Framing Strategies

Flores tactically enlisted *¡Hola!* journalist Tico Medina to structure her autobiography as a defense argument—“I cannot go around asking for forgiveness [. . .] because I have done nothing wrong” (323)—instructing him to transcribe her words “without removing a single period or comma” (312). Medina frames *Lola en carne viva* as her metaphorical “defendant’s stand” (312), reinforcing the idea that her own life story serves as a justification for her actions. At Flores’s request, he ensures that the autobiography follows a clear “guiding thread” (53), later likened to “a string of rosary beads” (316), symbolizing her suffering as sacred endurance.¹¹ Medina portrays himself as an author entirely committed to capturing Flores’s “real” voice, describing his role as that of her “spokesperson” (24), her “echo” (24), or her “prophet” (95), while indicating that to achieve this fidelity, “I have sacrificed [. . .] my style” (95). He keeps reiterating that the real author of the book is not him but Flores

herself: “It is Lola who speaks [...] who suffers, who remembers, who feels” (48), and that the book is a direct and unaltered transcription of her story.

More importantly, however, is his acknowledgement of his initial struggle with Flores to control the narrative, only to concede that “she has won the battle”, given that her extremely powerful or “torrential” voice ultimately dominated the discourse: “I wanted her to speak like me. Impossible. It is me who speaks and, what is worse, writes like her” (95). Medina describes Flores’s voice as a “torrent”, and her narrative as a “formidable cataclysm” filled with “sentiment”, adding “You will discover it yourselves” (95). These descriptions elevate *Lola en carne viva* beyond mere autobiography, transforming it into an emotional, explosive testimony that reflects the extraordinary intensity and sweeping force of Flores’s personality. However, while Medina foregrounds Flores’s powerful or “torrential” voice, he *silences* the fact that such a “torrential” voice *clears away* or *erases* not only his (Medina’s) *own* voice but all *other voices* as well. As her symbolic “defense lawyer”, Medina is Flores’s accomplice in *quieting* that her voice is not *truly* her own: to redeem her star image as *Lola de España*, Flores is also sacrificing her own voice (or agency), persisting as the “spokesperson” or “echo” of the monologic star persona fabricated by Suevia Films, a persona whose single, authoritative voice controls the entire narrative, suppressing, dismissing, or delegitimizing all other voices.

Confidentially, Medina knows that Flores must maintain that monologically constructed persona to portray her success as a struggle for survival to ensure that her image as *Lola de España* remains compelling and credible. He knows that her monologic myth is not hers alone, but rather belongs to the Spanish people who have grown up with it and with the characters who inhabit it. He understands that she must work within this shared narrative to redeem her star image and ensure her legacy stays intact and resonant with the cultural identity of Spain. In light of this knowledge, Medina authenticates Flores’s myth by asserting that the Spanish people already “know a lot” about it due to her long-standing media presence: “Lola has been a part, whether we like it or not, of the history of Spain over the last forty years” (15). He describes the media coverage of her life story—through “radio, television [...] newspapers, newscasts, Saturday shows, etc.” (15)—as symbolic “files” that encompass both her personal life and the life of the characters representing not only her parents and siblings but also “her grandchildren, her children, her managers, her companions in struggle or passion, her doctors, her cousins [...]” (20), as well as “the men who loved her so much and never forgot her” (20). He claims that these media “files” have made her “endearing myth” deeply familiar to the Spanish public, for whom, he adds “Flores is the most beloved daughter of God, one of the most cherished and endearing myths of Spain, yesterday, today, and always” (17).

Medina signals that he does not want to alter Flores’s identity, which so strongly resonates with the Spanish people, because “This is a true, authentic Lola, one that I do not want to change for anything in the world. There you have her beloved characters from back then” (94). By uniting all the media “files” into what he calls a “complete file cabinet” (16), Medina frames Flores’s autobiography as the definitive, conclusive version of her “authentic” life story, a last word—or “ultimate word”, in Bakhtin’s terms—that encapsulates not only her individual journey as an “artist who has suffered a lot” (391) for her hard-earned accomplishments but also “the history of Spain over the last years” (18). Medina’s framing thus elevates Flores’s monologic narrative from an individual myth to a cultural and national artifact, reinforcing her status as a figure whose entire life story embodies Spain’s identity and its broader historical trajectory from the mid-1940s to the present (1990). For this reason, implies Medina, his book could have been titled “*LOLA DE ESPAÑA*” (with capital letters, 24), instead of *Lola in Living Flesh*.¹²

With Medina's assistance, Flores constructs her autobiography as a heroic tale of hardship and endurance, explicitly stating that her memoir could have been titled "*I Confess That I Have Suffered*" (325), referencing Pablo Neruda's autobiography, titled *I Confess That I Have Lived*. Reinforcing the notion that her suffering justifies her legacy, she insists "I don't want people to pity me, not at all. But I do want, I demand, I need [...] to be treated fairly. So many things have been published about me!" (427). Medina supports this by declaring that she has already "lived her purgatory" (24) and should not have to seek forgiveness for past accusations. Until now, he specifies, Flores never publicly confessed her misery, giving the impression that she was like the protagonist of the old song who always proclaimed "Let no one know my suffering" (73).

In fact, Medina states that even when Flores underwent "daily and urgent" cancer treatments, hiding "from everyone", she "went alone" each day to the radiotherapy, and at night, "she sang, danced, and performed as Lola Flores in the cabaret" (21). This corroborates Flores's avowal that at night she kept performing as she always did so that her audience "wouldn't notice anything" (22), adding that her Spanish public "deserved everything" (22), which implies that for her as an artist, entertaining and bringing joy to her Spanish public was paramount and, therefore, she consistently concealed her personal and public problems from her audience. Medina enhances this picture, declaring that, despite having "too many problems for one person", Flores is an extraordinary woman "because she never breaks down". Instead, "[she] endures, endures, keeps going, falls [...]. But immediately [...] gets up, [...] straightens the bones of her powerful soul, and raises her raspy voice:—'Come on, let's move forward!'" (20). Medina claims that her endurance demonstrates "Nothing can defeat Lola [...]. Lola is a woman beyond compare [...], singular. Unique" (20). The journalist not only exalts Flores's capacity for enduring suffering but transforms it into a symbol of superior strength, thus substantiating Flores's self-presentation as a woman made of steel: "I am made of stainless steel, like those old watches" (58). If it were not because she is made of steel, she asks "how could I survive so many tough times, so many sufferings?" (58). Both Medina's and Flores's framing heightens her meritocracy myth, aligning her resilience with National Catholic ideals that valorize suffering as a moral virtue. Through this lens, Flores's suffering is presented not as a burden but as the ultimate proof of her endurance, transforming her into an invincible national icon: "Life is a battle", she declares, adding "No one will defeat Lola [...] because, after I'm dead [...], I'll continue to be news" (18).

Medina states that rather than other "illustrious journalists, brilliant academics, or immortal poets" (52), he was chosen to write Flores's story, because he "knows her better than any other writer" (23). He amplifies her credibility by emphasizing her exceptional memory—presumably, she has the memory of an "elephant" (22)—and using synesthetic descriptions to make her recollections feel vivid and immediate (39). Additionally, he incorporates diary entries, photographs, and testimonies from her acquaintances to give a documentary-like realism to the narrative, even though he never verifies dates, events, or other factual elements to ensure that Flores's life story aligns with public records. Instead, he approves of her narrative containing "few dates, because this is not a ledger. Few numbers, not to say none. What it does have is a lot of life inside it—it beats, and if you press your ear to this page, you will hear it" (88). Despite his apparent documentary-like realism, he portrays Flores's birth as a divine heralding of her future glory: "A sovereign and magical hymn was playing. It was the *Royal March*! Lola has told it to me many times, straightening her spine like when Nefertiti told her vassals that she was born the daughter of the gods" (40). The invocation of the national anthem during her birth positions Flores as a patriotic figure from the very beginning, suggesting that her destiny as *Lola de España* was providential: "Her name, Lola, was already written in the stars" (43), indicates Medina,

adding “The fortune-tellers of the time had already foreseen her birth in the bottoms of coffee cups” (43). He describes her first cry as “a golden trumpet in that small, clean bar of Pedro Flores” (26), elevating it to a divine heralding of future greatness. Every detail—her birth at exactly noon, beneath a sunny sky, on *Calle del Sol* (or Sun Street) next to *Cristo de la Inspiración*—reinforces the notion that she was “marked with fire, indelible, though invisible then” (62). Medina, in his role as her “prophet”, presents Flores’s journey as a sacred trial, aligning her autobiography with the Francoist aesthetics of nationalist mythmaking, which used sunlit imagery to symbolize the triumph of the Falangists’ Nueva España (Ortiz 1999, p. 485).¹³

3. La Fe de Pedro Flores

The setting of Flores’s birth, her father’s bar *La Fe de Pedro Flores* (The Faith of Pedro Flores), is framed as a sanctuary of faith. Flores asserts that her Catholic faith has been genetically inherited, fusing biological determinism and Catholicism to bolster her survival narrative as divinely preordained:

[My father] gave it [the bar] a name that was a symbol: *La Fe de Pedro Flores*. That was my father’s faith. The faith I have [...] because the good and the bad are inherited in the blood’s genes. How could I not have all the faith in the world? [...] How could I not have faith through all the bad times, which have been many, of my entire life?

The irony of invoking Social Spencerism to emphasize inherited Catholic faith cannot be overstated. Spencer’s pseudoscientific principles—focusing on the “survival of the strongest” through biological adaptation—are repurposed here to validate faith as a hereditary trait passed down through the genes of the blood: “my father’s faith [...] is what I also wanted my children and my children’s children to inherit” (38). This application of Spencer’s doctrine naturalizes Catholicism as an inherent trait of Flores’s identity, reinforcing the Franco regime’s vision of Spain as a homogenous Catholic nation. Rhetorical questions like “[h]ow could I not have all the faith in the world?” or “[h]ow could I not be Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman?” (112) further frame Flores’s struggles as trials of her inherited faith, aligning her strength and perseverance “through all the bad times” with the Catholic ideal of suffering as redemptive. In essence, Flores’s fight for survival as *Lola de España* is presented not as an act of personal willpower but as the inevitable outcome of her “inherited faith”. This framing—both ironic and insidious—recasts her triumph as a natural result of her religious faith, subtly reinforcing the regime’s Catholic ideals under the guise of biological determinism.

During the immediate postwar period, the symbols of triumphant Spain had to be witnessed not only in cultural productions but also in “commercial advertising”. Thus, claims of religious faith—like *La Fe de Pedro Flores*—were employed “to advertise” all kinds of businesses and products, which also displayed “mottos and symbols of triumphant Spain” (Sueiro Seoane 13). However, the narrative’s attribution of these symbols to Pedro’s bar and Flores’s birth is anachronistic, since her birth took place in 1923, more than a decade before the Falangists won the Civil War. This explains why Medina prefers not to mention dates: to prevent readers from noticing the discrepancy and the prioritizing of mythmaking over factual accuracy. Not surprisingly, Garzón finds that a “penumbra of mystery” hovers over the chronology of Flores’s autobiography, feeling the constant need to “apologize for exhausting the patience” of his “kind reader so often with references to the chronological tightrope walking performed by Lola Flores in her memoirs, inevitably and logically so cited” (337). Moreover, Pedro’s bars are filled with “virgins, posters of bullfighters, and bottles with *duende* inside” (40), which are not just decorative objects: they create a

miniature ideological world, reinforcing the Francoist fusion of religion, traditional gender roles, and Andalusian folklore as key components of national identity.

The presence of virgins reflects the deeply embedded role of Catholicism in Francoist Spain, where National-Catholicism served as both a political and cultural doctrine. The regime fused Catholicism with the State, using religious imagery to promote obedience, sacrifice, and moral purity. The virgins in the bar symbolize the idealized woman in Francoist ideology: chaste, suffering, self-sacrificing, devoted to their duty to family and country.¹⁴ Decorated with holy imagery, Pedro's bars reflect the Francoist strategy of using Catholicism to legitimize its rule, instilling a sense of moral righteousness and traditional family values, while ensuring cultural spaces (like taverns, theaters, and homes) remained under the moral authority of the Church. Bullfighting was one of the key Francoist cultural symbols, tied to the myth of Spanish virility, nationalism, and bravery. The bullfighter (*torero*) represented a disciplined, fearless male figure who embodied Francoist ideals of masculinity: stoic, dominant, and able to confront danger without fear. The posters of bullfighters within the bars reinforce the ideal of the Spanish man as a figure of courage, honor, and controlled violence, an image heavily promoted by Francoist propaganda during the immediate postwar period to construct a national identity based on patriarchal dominance and militaristic strength.

The glorification of the *torero* mirrored the glorification of Franco himself, who was often portrayed as a brave leader taming the chaos of the Republic (symbolized by the bull). In Pedro's bar, these posters serve as a reminder of the masculine ideals imposed by the Francoist state, reinforcing a gendered social structure where men occupied spaces of heroism and dominance, while women (as represented by the virgins) were positioned as passive, moral figures of devotion. This patriarchal hierarchy aligns with how Flores's own star persona was shaped by Suevia Films: she was celebrated as a force of nature—a "torrent"—but also as a submissive figure, publicly embodying exoticism, passion, and sexuality through her flamenco performances while privately embodying the gender behavior of the Francoist ideal woman. The bottles with *duende* inside, rather than with beer or wine inside, symbolize the commodification and containment of Andalusian folklore under Francoist cultural policies.¹⁵ The regime, while promoting flamenco, sought to sanitize and control it, ensuring it remained a symbol of Spanish nationalism rather than a site of political subversion. This mirrors the construction of Flores herself as a national symbol: passionately untamed, and sensual in her onstage gender performances, yet ultimately controlled within the ideological boundaries of Francoist Spain in her offstage gender behavior. The setting of Pedro's taverns foreshadows the embodiment of these same Francoist ideals by Flores's persona, who grew up to become a living symbol of the very mythology embedded in them.

4. Monologic Depiction of Flores's Parents

Precisely because Flores is quietly portrayed as a woman who *internally* adheres to the National Catholic ideology of the regime, she idealizes the characters who obey traditional gender mandates, such as her parents Pedro and Rosario, who are not depicted as human beings but as stereotypes of the perfect Francoist patriarchal couple. Flores puts her parents on a pedestal, portraying her mother, Rosario, as "a good woman, beautiful beyond words" (33), and her father, Pedro, as "a cameo of a man, small, kind, and good. A gem" (33). Pedro is described as "so honest, so true, and so good. And above all, so handsome" (35), while their marriage is framed as "glorious" because they are both "so good and hardworking, so kind and clean" (36). However, their relationship is deeply patriarchal—Pedro is "very jealous" (35), dislikes Rosario "going out alone" (36), and expects her to sing only for him, viewing a woman's voice as "merchandise" (35).

Flores does not question their patriarchal dynamics but instead idealizes them, aligning with the SF's ideology, which dictated that women's role is to "harmonize wills" and submit to "the stronger will and wisdom of men" (Primo de Rivera, qtd. in [Martín Gaité 1987](#), p. 58). Rosario embodies this role, following Pedro each time he decides to move from Jerez to Seville, leaving behind all her family on multiple occasions. Even though Jerez is her "whole world", Rosario concedes "It pains me to do this, Pedro [...], but you are the man of this house" (57). Once in Seville, Rosario "spent the day sighing, sewing clothes" (58). When they were married, Pedro gave her a sewing machine. Flores praises her mother's skill: "She sewed divinely. A true glory" (36). Despite financial hardship, Rosario never uses her sewing skills for income, as Pedro would not approve. Instead, when the family is destitute in Madrid, she secretly begs in the streets, fabricating a tragic story: "My husband has died, the father of this girl [...], we have lost the man of the house [...]. We have seven children waiting in the shack. Can you help us, even just enough to cover the funeral costs so that the poor man can be laid to rest?" (189). Flores romanticizes this deception as maternal bravery: "What a mother won't do for her children!" (186). The sewing machine, which could symbolize economic agency, remains unused and is instead glorified as an object "as important as the marriage bed. To sew and to love" (66), reinforcing the regime's confinement of women to domesticity.

In *Usos amorosos de la posguerra española* (1987), Carmen Martín Gaité critiques this systemic oppression, describing Francoist women as "exemplary Penelopes condemned to sewing, to be quiet, and to wait" (72). Ferrer employs Gaité's feminist critiques to portray Flores as a modern woman. However, Flores's narrative silences feminist perspectives such as Gaité's, presenting Rosario's suffering as an act of noble devotion rather than a consequence of patriarchal control. Even in extreme poverty, Rosario's self-sacrifice is exalted: "My mother lost five kilos; she says from crying so much, but I think it was from not eating because if there was anything, she would take it out of her mouth to give it to us" (148). This glorification aligns with Francoist ideals of motherhood as a religious and patriotic duty, reinforced by Rosario's faith in divine motherhood: she sings *saetas* (religious flamenco songs) to the "Christ of the Gypsies" when fearing infertility and rejoices when she conceives again, believing she has fulfilled "the part that was my responsibility" (46).

As Flores begins to gain recognition as a performer, Rosario accompanies her everywhere as custodian of her virtue—first to her local shows and later to her national and international performances. A well-known anecdote about Rosario illustrates this dynamic: she asks the airplane commander's permission to cook a stew in one of her international travels with Flores: "Naturally, her request was denied [...], but she did not understand this" (235). Rosario's chaperoning reinforces the idea that woman's virginity is sacred and must be actively preserved until marriage, the ultimate safeguard of women's virtue, which was not just a personal matter but a family and societal concern, tied to the ideals of honor, sacrifice, and moral integrity. Flores's narrative thus constructs a simulacrum in which her parents are not represented as real people but as archetypal figures of Francoist masculinity and femininity. Flores's text perpetuates the regime's patriarchal values, presenting suffering, submission, and maternal sacrifice as the idealized role of the "real woman" (*El coraje*) or, in Gaité's terms, the "mujer muy mujer" (the womanly woman) who follows the model of the "*mater dolorosa*" ([Martín Gaité 1987](#), p. 108).

5. The Portrayal of Flores's Suffering Childhood

Flores's depiction of her childhood emphasizes suffering from poverty and instability, describing cramped living conditions, and simple meals that lacked fish or meat and often consisted of just bread and olive oil. She calls her parents' constant moving back and forth between Jerez and Seville an "unliving" (54). Medina confirms that Pedro "lasted in

jobs less than a candy at the door of a school and spent his life on the road" (73), adding that such an itinerant life was a "constant restlessness" for the girl. However, Flores offers contradictory explanations for Pedro's movements—at times attributing them to his discomfort with excessive familiarity, at others to financial instability or ambition: "He was drawn to a bigger city, and Seville was [...] the capital of the world" (81). Ultimately, she admits, "What I have never explained to myself is why we changed residence so often" (*El coraje*), suggesting an intentional ambiguity. Acknowledging that Pedro's instability resulted from financial hardship could have undermined the resilience and strength she seeks to project. Moreover, explicitly tying it to economic struggles would have challenged Francoist myths of national stability and progress. Instead, Flores frames hardship as a test of endurance, aligning her narrative with the regime's emphasis on perseverance. She describes her childhood as "far from wonderful, but clean and beautiful like few others" (82), sanitizing poverty into a lesson in resilience.

Even minor tragedies serve as trials of character—her dog's death is framed as a formative experience: "These little stories are what form a person's character" (69). When an infected wound confines her to bed for months, she endures in silence so as not to burden her mother: "She already had enough with her own things, with my father changing houses and jobs again" (80). This portrayal aligns with the SF's ideal of women as silent bearers of suffering for the sake of family and social stability. Flores later echoes this ideology as an adult, when referring to how she suppressed her terrible pain during a kidney stone surgery so that her mother, who was dying in the same hospital, would not hear her cry: "I couldn't even cry, as much as it comforted me" (395). Her suffering is again framed as selfless endurance, reinforcing the patriarchal construct of female sacrifice as strength. This seems ironic in light of Flores's statement "They have said that I sold the exclusive rights to my mother's death [...]. It's a lie [...], there are things that cannot be sold [...]. That day, I also began to die with my mother. But I realize that I endure a lot, that I am very strong, that I survive" (396). The irony is that, while she rejects the notion of commodifying grief, she simultaneously capitalizes on it to transform her mother's death into a testament of her own strength. Flores exploits the sad occasion to implicitly suggest that her childhood role as self-sacrificing and enduring was not just temporary but a life-long commitment. She then states "I am a woman who always lived in an ay!, more from pain than from pleasure. But I believe it has been worth it" (396), thus positioning her life as a continuous struggle where suffering is an inherent part of her existence, but one that ultimately brings her the reward of her success as *Lola de España*.

6. Discrimination Framed as Childhood Suffering

Framed as another of her childhood sufferings, Flores invokes a "curse" from a neighbor called Alfonsa. In reality, however, this curse serves to contrast Alfonsa with the idealized maternal figure of Rosario. Alfonsa is labeled as bitter, irritating, and dangerous not because of the suffering she allegedly caused the child Flores with her curse, but because she challenges the Francoist dogma of motherhood as women's most noble and patriotic role. Alfonsa embodies the negative stereotype of the *solterona* (spinster) in Francoist Spain, when unmarried women were seen as failures, lacking a "natural purpose" in marriage and motherhood: "The very term 'spinster' carried such an implicit tone of insult that it was assigned behind the back of the person in question" (Martín Gaité 1987, p. 43). Flores describes Alfonsa as a "witch" who is "ugly and cursed" (66), dehumanizing her in the same way Francoist discourse did to women who did not conform to traditional roles. By portraying Alfonsa as an unfulfilled figure who lashes out at her—"I hope you kill yourself, girl!" (67); "But haven't you killed yourself yet, girl?" (67)—Flores reinforces the trope of the unmarried woman as bitter and hostile.

Martin Gaité condemns these negative portrayals of unmarried women, showing how they acted as social control, pushing women into marriage. Whereas Martin Gaité gives these women a voice, Flores's narrative further marginalizes them, implicitly warning that women who reject traditional roles risk social and symbolic punishment. Through Alfonsa's depiction, Flores perpetuates Francoist ideology, reinforcing the notion that women outside the domestic sphere bring misfortune upon themselves and others. Moreover, by invoking Alfonsa's curse, Flores also indirectly advances her self-presentation as a victim rather than someone deserving of criticism. She claims "From that incident, I was left with the bitter taste of the curse, although I imagine someone must have cursed me again", adding "But who could have cursed me [...] if I haven't done anything bad to anyone?" (67). This rhetorical question shifts blame away from her and onto unnamed persecutors, allowing her to reframe past and present accusations as part of a broader pattern of wrongful targeting. Rather than addressing specific criticisms, Flores employs the curse as an implicit metaphor for her situation. By presenting herself as an innocent woman unfairly attacked, she discredits her critics while sidestepping their claims. This narrative strategy appeals to emotion, casting her as a resilient figure enduring adversity, ultimately shifting public perception in her favor.

Flores's depiction of her childhood suffering includes episodes of male aggression that subtly serve to reinforce patriarchal gender norms. She recounts an incident where a man attempted to take advantage of her mother during a movie, prompting Rosario to stab him with a hairpin (64). Flores also recalls a non-consensual kiss that left her feeling violated: "That man took part of my treasure chest of purity, even though all he did was kiss me" (91). A more violent episode involves her boyfriend Antonio Burgos, who was "very forward. Always, always, I had to stop him" (137). When he physically overpowered her, she fell and "shattered" her carefully maintained face, later begging her mother "Mama, send me to my godmother [...] in Seville, because I need to get rid of the memory of that bad man" (138). Through these depictions, Flores's narrative reinforces the myth that men's sexual desires are innate and more intense or aggressive than women's, whose sexuality is supposedly tied to reproduction and emotional connection.

By portraying men as inherently sexually aggressive, her narrative enforces the restrictive and damaging expectations of them. In *Los usos amorosos*, Martín Gaité points out that this myth places undue pressure on men to perform sexually, leading to anxiety and insecurity when they fail to fit this stereotype. It also stigmatizes men who prioritized emotional intimacy or experienced lower libido due to personal or medical reasons (111-2). These ideas were deeply entrenched in religious and Francoist discourses, which placed the burden of control squarely on women as the ones expected to regulate male desire by adhering to strict standards of modesty and behavior. Flores acknowledges that what these men did "was not well done" (91), but her acknowledgment does not necessarily serve as strong criticism of their actions. While it implies that their behavior is inappropriate, it does not explicitly condemn or challenge the broader issue of consent, gendered power dynamics, or the normalization of such actions. A stronger critique would not only acknowledge the wrongdoing but also emphasize the impact on women and question the societal norms that allow such behavior to be excused or minimized. Instead of this, Flores frames both Rosario's and her own reactions as heroic defenses of their virtue, reinforcing the Francoist belief that women's worth is tied to their purity and dignity.

Also framed as suffering, Flores includes episodes of voyeurism that highlight tensions within the patriarchal system she endorses. She recalls a "madman" who escaped an asylum, "filling the neighborhood's corners and rooms with fear" (102), and whose terrifying stare has continued to haunt her since childhood: "She wakes up startled, thinking about it, about the eyes of the madman [...], which she would later see again in another way,

in another place” (102) as Medina emphasizes. A second episode involves a neighbor who “went mad” after violating a taboo dictating that a woman must not wet her feet or head during menstruation. In patriarchal and superstition-driven societies, menstruation taboos function as mechanisms of control. When the woman ignores the taboo, she does not simply defy a harmless superstition; rather, she violates a gendered code of conduct meant to regulate her body. Her act of defiance is not merely personal: it is a symbolic rebellion against a larger structure that seeks to control women through myths, rituals, and restrictions. When Flores looks through a keyhole, she finds the neighbor staring back at her: “It was as if a dagger had suddenly pierced the globe of my eye” (104). Her horror at both incidents reinforces the patriarchal notion that those who deviate from social norms—whether men who lose control of their desires or women who defy gendered restrictions—are doomed to madness. Male voyeurism is part of a broader patriarchal system that privileges the male gaze, reinforces female subjugation, and denies women full autonomy over their bodies and self-representation. However, instead of acknowledging male voyeurism as a systemic issue, Flores isolates it as a pathology, allowing patriarchy to remain intact as the “normal” or “correct” order of society. At the same time, her terror of the female gaze reveals an implicit discomfort with female agency, as transgressive women are framed as frightening rather than sympathetic.

These incidents also serve as an implicit warning to the reader. When describing her suffering during her trial for tax evasion, she emphasizes that she felt scrutinized by “hundreds of thousands of eyes” (416) staring at her, reminiscent of Medina’s remark that she would “later see again” the staring eyes of the madman “in another way, in another place”. This parallel suggests an indirect message to readers: attempting to analyze or “look through the keyhole” of her autobiography would be equal to another invasion of her privacy. By conflating privacy as a right with privacy as a tool of patriarchal control, Flores seeks to maintain her absolute authority over the text. For my part, by dissecting her framing strategies, I engage in the very act of voyeurism that she rejects—not as an invasion of her private life, but as a resistance to a monologic discourse that suppresses alternative perspectives and critical thought. This analytical approach exposes her mechanisms of manipulation, restoring space for dialogue and challenging her patriarchal control over identity, culture, and history.

7. Longing for a Brother

Flores’s childhood narrative also perpetuates gendered expectations through her longing for a brother, prioritizing male heirs in line with Francoist values: “If only I had, mama, a little brother to play with! My mother sighed and kept sewing” (63). She yearns for a brother, yet never expresses a similar wish for a sister: “I kept waiting for the brother who never came” (74). Medina reinforces this patriarchal theme, describing how “she, a lonely girl [. . .], the only girl in the midst of all of humanity” (74), wished for a male sibling: “She awaited him as eagerly as one awaits a first child who never arrives” (74). Her father’s own desire for a son—“He deeply wanted a son, to make him a bullfighter” (41)—mirrors broader cultural preferences for male successors. Ultimately, when Flores finally gains a brother, she expresses maternal joy rather than sibling camaraderie: “It was like holding a doll that had rained down from heaven” (*El coraje*). She describes feeling fulfillment in taking on a maternal role: “That little one filled my small life” (85). Her gratitude—“Thank you, dear Virgin, for the brother I so badly needed” (83)—ties the experience to religious devotion, reinforcing the belief that motherhood is a woman’s highest calling. This theme extends into her domestic role as a female child, as her education is twice interrupted: first when her mother withdraws her from school when her good behavior was not rewarded with a doll in her school’s Christmas raffle—“A sorrow [. . .] I remember

as if it were yesterday" (70)—, and again when she is pulled out of school to care for her brother: "We're going to take you out of school so you can take care of him. You have a lot of responsibility, Lola" (85). Flores's happy acceptance of her "fulfilling" maternal role reflects Francoist gender norms, when caregiving was prioritized over female education.

8. Carrying Flamenco in the Blood

After Jerez's *La fe de Pedro Flores*, Pedro rents a *tablao* in Seville he names *Los Leones* (*The Lions*), a name also symbolically tied to the regime, as it evokes the "*Alto de Los Leones de Castilla*", a place greatly mystified by Francoist culture. Flores claims that, in *Los Leones*, Pedro "served wine and friendship" (46) to flamenco artists who were already a "legend" in Spain (55). Since she is at home caring for her brother, *Los Leones* becomes her place of learning: "*Los Leones* was my school, my university, everything" (46), explaining "On the nights at the *tablao*, when all the children in the world were asleep, I was there, peeking through the door, learning and, as soon as I could, to the amazement of my family, dancing, singing [...], as God intended; but in my own way, which was already the way of Lola Flores" (48). This framing suggests that, in the "university" of Pedro's *tablao*, Flores acquires her unique artistic style as naturally as breathing air. Although Pedro is not a *gitano*—"the gypsy was my mother, and not entirely, since she was the daughter of a gypsy, an oil seller, notably" (*El coraje*)—by absorbing the rhythm of flamenco, she implies that gypsy blood figuratively enters her veins: "I'm not a gypsy, though the truth is, [...] deep down in my marrow I feel completely gypsy, totally gypsy" (*El coraje*). Her narrative leaves no room for doubt: she is not *gitana* by birth, yet had no other option but to become one: it was written that she would live among Andalusia's greatest *gitano* artists and thus become "totally gypsy".

By imitating the singing and dancing she sees at night through the door of her father's *tablao*, she spontaneously grasps flamenco's rhythm, which, she insists, is not learned in academic settings but rather, "It is carried in the blood" (*El coraje*). This statement reminds us of her Catholic faith as "inherited in the blood's genes", thus reinforcing the idea that her identity, both as a flamenco artist and as a faithful Catholic, was biologically and divinely predestined. "Who can take away my origins?" (37), she asks, implying that no one has the right to question the legitimacy of her gypsy identity, given that it was not a personal choice but a destiny, something preordained by both God (or the "higher spheres") and the Spencerist law of biological inheritance: "Nor am I going to break that biological cycle. It has been written since forever" (90). Her monologic narrative seeks to ensure that her gypsy identity is not perceived as a construction or appropriation but as a fulfillment of destiny, aligning it with the Francoist narrative of Andalusian folklore as an expression of Spain's immutable national essence.

9. Promoting "Double Burden" for Women

Even as Flores becomes a performer—"There was no wedding, no baptism, no family dance—engagement, feast day, name day—that I didn't attend [...] as a guest child artist" (111)—she maintains dual responsibilities: "I had to take care of the whole house, I cooked [...], swept, ironed, washed the clothes and hung them out [...] on the terrace or in the patio, singing. ... I was a homemaker, and on top of that. ... On top of that, I was already an artist" (118). Medina extends this "double burden" to her current life by insinuating that even now when she is already an internationally known diva, she continues to fully embrace the role of homemaker: "[Flores] keeps an eye on everything—whether Antonio, her son who has caused her so much suffering, has arrived [...], whether Rosario has called, whether there's news of Lolita, who's in Argentina [...]. Lola, earning and spending, paying bills, buying mattresses for her children, devotional medals for her grandchildren"

(49–50). By glorifying her ability to excel both as a performer and homemaker, Flores's narrative promotes the "double burden" imposed on women, romanticizing the expectation that they must succeed professionally while also upholding domestic duties. This framing ignores structural inequalities—such as limited childcare, wage disparities, and societal expectations—that make this dual role unrealistic for most women. By presenting her domestic sacrifices as both natural and fulfilling, Flores's narrative legitimizes oppressive patriarchal ideals.

10. Invisible Racial and Homophobic Prejudices

Flores frames her flamenco artistry as "naturally" inherited, linking it to the "legendary" flamenco artists who frequented her father's taverns and to her racialized physiognomy. She claims "This thing about singing and dancing comes with you into the world, like the color of your skin. It's something you're born with" (124). Flores strengthens biological determinism by presenting her talent as innate rather than acquired through learning and discipline. Like most commentators, Garzón and Ferrer fail to interrogate the intersection of gender and race in Flores's narrative, instead reinforcing essentialist stereotypes about gypsy women. Both view Flores's dark features as natural rather than constructed. Garzón, for instance, states that Flores "appears more of a gitana than her husband Antonio González (alias El Pescaílla) because she is much darker than her husband" (197), while Ferrer highlights her "racial physiognomy" (218).¹⁶ Furthermore, both reproduce Medina's assertion that her flamenco teacher considered Flores as naturally talented. For example, Ferrer states "Flores danced like a gitana, which was tantamount to saying that she was genetically poised and dominant [...] in flamenco dancing" (Ferrer 2016, p. 98). These interpretations erase the years of training required to master flamenco, reducing this artistic expression to a product of race (or biology) rather than technique, discipline, and creativity.

Both authors also contribute to the hypersexualization of Flores, describing her as a "modern" Carmen-like *femme fatale* in every sense" (Ferrer 86), with Garzón calling her "a volcano in eruption" (16) and claiming audiences came to her flamenco performances to "experience the overflowing sexual drive that was officially prohibited in national life" (61). He further describes her as "instinctive and wild", with "carnal frenzy" and "unveiled sexual freedom" (67). This depiction objectifies the gypsy women impersonated by Flores, reinforcing the stereotype of them as irrational, hypersexual, and naturally gifted for singing and dancing but unfit for roles beyond entertainment. Such depictions legitimize racial essentialism and obscure the systemic inequalities that marginalized gypsy women face in education, employment, and social mobility. By romanticizing Flores's racialized and exoticized persona as a symbol of Spanish culture while ignoring her portrayal of her offstage life's strict adherence to patriarchal gender norms, these interpretations ultimately serve to keep silencing both the regime's political propaganda embedded in Flores's 1990s autobiography and the lived realities of discrimination, poverty, and exclusion faced by gypsy women during Francoist times.¹⁷

In reality, these interpretations ally with post-Francoist attempts to depoliticize Spain's cultural past, effectively sanitizing figures like Flores by stripping them of their historical and ideological context. In fact, they not only fail to acknowledge the deliberate structuring of her narrative through monologue and framing techniques but also reinforce the very romanticized, dehistoricized image of Flores that Francoist elites had once cultivated. Therefore, in a certain sense, such interpretations perpetuate the *Pacto de silencio* or Pact of Silence, the unofficial agreement among Spanish political elites during the Transition to Democracy (1975–1982) to avoid publicly addressing the crimes and human rights violations committed during Franco's dictatorship and the Spanish Civil War. This agreement was

not legally codified but was reinforced through political consensus, media self-censorship, and amnesty laws that prioritized national reconciliation over historical reckoning. The Ley de Memoria Histórica (Historical Memory Law), passed in 2007 under Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, sought to reverse the Pact of Silence by recognizing victims, opening mass graves, and removing Francoist street names and monuments such as the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's grand mausoleum, constructed using Republican political prisoners as forced labor. However, resistance from conservative sectors and institutions has continued, leading to ongoing debates over Spain's unresolved historical memory.

Ferrer claims that Flores always revendedicated her "racial" identity with "pride" (15), when, in reality, her narrative reveals deep biases against darker skin tones, which she neither questions nor rejects during her entire autobiographical account. She describes herself as "black as sin" (68) and recalls being nicknamed "la negrucia" ("the little black girl"), which she clarifies "isn't exactly a compliment" (68). She confesses "I suffered a lot looking at myself in the mirror" and "didn't like seeing myself so dark", adding that her daughter Lolita "also suffered a lot from the same thing" (71). Her language—associating darkness with suffering, sin, and with being scary—implies agreement with Eurocentric beauty standards, particularly harsh for women under Francoism, when physical appearance was crucial to feminine value. By expressing aversion to her "black" complexion, she perpetuates the stigmatization of darker skin, reinforcing a worldview where beauty remains tied to whiteness.

Further, she describes her racialized beauty as something that "unsettled men, and I noticed it immediately. I let myself be admired, but in a wholesome way" (111). This framing aligns with long-standing stereotypes of black women as exotic, mysterious, and transgressive. Medina reinforces this perception, stating that Flores has "a rare attraction, she has sin. . . she has that, mystery" (390). Flores's description of being admired "in a wholesome way" suggests that, while her racialized allure was perceived as intriguingly provocative, she remained deeply committed to patriarchal ideals, believing that a woman's greatest "treasure" is her purity—"my treasure, and what I value most: my honor" (138)—and that women must preserve it for "the man you must love forever" (159) since, for the "novio" or bridegroom, "nothing is more beautiful than taking down the virginity of his wife" (290) during their wedding night. Although Flores seems to proudly embrace her racialized identity, her narrative implies that this acceptance is merely performative: her never-modified discomfort with her racialized skin tone clearly contradicts her outward spectacle of racial pride. By failing to challenge her racial biases in her 1990s autobiography, Flores does not redefine beauty standards or critique the racism she purportedly suffered from. Instead, she implicitly reinforces the very prejudices that framed her career, ensuring that her constructed identity remains a spectacle of *España folclórica* rather than a challenge to the racial hierarchies embedded in Francoist ideology.

Although the gay men who imitate Flores's performances are not framed as sources of suffering, her narrative reveals deep biases against them as well. They are portrayed as Flores's "friends" and called "mariquitas" (382). "Marica" is the Spanish slang term for a gay man, often employed pejoratively, unless used by gay and lesbian people as a gesture of defiance. Flores's use of the term appears endearing at first because of its diminutive form (-ita), which in Spanish is frequently used to convey affection, smallness, or familiarity. However, the apparent warmth of the term is immediately undercut by Flores's phrase "God has not made everyone perfect" (382), which implies that being gay is an imperfection, a deviation from the heterosexual norm. This juxtaposition reveals a covert form of discrimination, where the language seems superficially affectionate but actually reinforces a hierarchy of human worth. The diminutive, rather than softening the insult, infantilizes or belittles the subjects, making their identity seem less serious,

less valid. Meanwhile, the follow-up phrase subtly frames homosexuality as a flaw to be tolerated rather than a neutral or positive trait. This rhetorical strategy is common in casual homophobia, where seemingly benign or even affectionate language masks underlying bias. By pairing an ostensibly affectionate diminutive with an exclusionary statement, Flores simultaneously acknowledges and diminishes the identity of her gay “friends”, reinforcing heteronormativity while giving the impression that she lacks hostility towards them.

11. Tumultuous Affair with Manolo Caracol

The portrayal of Flores’s suffering in Jerez and Seville during her childhood differs significantly from how her adult suffering in Madrid is framed. Flores’s childhood suffering is framed as a necessary trial that shaped her character. Her father’s financial struggles and her mother’s sacrifices are presented as honorable burdens, reinforcing the idea that Flores inherited strength from her ancestors. Even moments of exclusion—such as not winning the school doll raffle despite her good grades—are framed not as injustices but as preparation for a greater purpose. While her childhood suffering shows how she learns to accept sacrifice as her destiny, her adult suffering shows how she learns to fulfil it. Flores’s unwavering faith in the myth of passionate love leads her to disappointment and suffering. These are framed as necessary trials that force her to control her passion and desires for the benefit of family and nation. Her adult story is not just about her love affairs, but about the way in which her belief in the construct of passionate love is destroyed, bringing her to accept her role as the symbolic *mater dolorosa*. The legendary flamenco singer Manolo Caracol (born Manuel Ortega Juárez) becomes an essential, inescapable figure in her narrative, in which he is framed as the “protagonist of the most passionate and tumultuous chapter of my story, the man who, in the end, would change my life” (193).

Historically, Caracol won first prize at the Concurso de Cante Jondo (1922), a flamenco competition organized by Manuel de Falla and Federico García Lorca in Granada. The competition aimed to protect and promote *cante jondo* (deep song), the most traditional and emotionally intense form of flamenco. Falla and Lorca saw it as an authentic expression of Andalusian culture that was at risk of being overshadowed by more commercialized flamenco styles. Caracol’s victory established him as a star in the Spanish flamenco world. His partnership with Flores in the famous show *Zambra* (1943–1951) was essential to ensure that audiences and critics also recognize her as an authentic flamenco performer. *Zambra* was likely produced with this specific purpose in mind, serving as a vehicle to elevate her status and position her as the poster face of the regime. Probably, Caracol agreed to participate in *Zambra* for his own strategic reasons. Given the growing influence of cinema, *Zambra* was likely presented to him as a stepping stone toward securing roles in movies, expanding his career beyond the stage and into a medium that would give him broader visibility. Caracol himself said that starring in several Spanish films produced during the regime, including *Embrujo* (1947) alongside Flores, cemented his status as a major cultural figure (Ferrer 2016, p. 258).

In her autobiography, Flores mentions that the “pictures” of *Zambra*’s promotion—which “have traveled around the whole world”—illustrate the passion or “volcano” that already “burned” within her and Caracol (196). The highly publicized promotion of *Zambra* turned Flores and Caracol into the most talked-about duos in Spanish entertainment at the time, captivating audiences with their performances of their onstage, as well as their public offstage, passionate chemistry. Their performances embodied the ardent intensity of the forbidden loves depicted in the romantic *copla* lyrics they sang, blurring the line between art and reality. In her autobiography, Flores frames *Zambra* as a “natural” progression in her career, positioning it as an organic step that ultimately leads to her high-value exclusive contract with Suevia Films, emphasizing that the signing of the contract was attended by

“all the journalists from Madrid and Andalucía and America [. . .], photographers and NO DO cameras, half of the world was there” (232).

The Francoist NO DO (short for “*Noticiarios y Documentales*”) was a state-controlled newsreel and documentary series in Spain, produced between 1943 and 1981. It was established during the Franco dictatorship as the sole source of newsreel production in the country, effectively functioning as a propaganda tool for the regime (Cerdán 2012, p. 418). The attendance of so many journalists and NO DO cameras explains why Garzón characterizes the event as “spectacular” (85). Most likely, however, the vastly publicized event was a state-sponsored propaganda episode to influence public perception and attitudes, underscoring both the economic power of González’s studio—thus reinforcing its status as a leading player in the Francoist entertainment sector—and the value of the folkloric star, not just in terms of talent but as a marketable commodity¹⁸. The greatly publicized event could generate anticipation and interest in the studios’ future projects, boosting box office sales even before any actual content was produced. It could also strengthen the notion that Flores’s association with those national and international projects was worth significant investment, thus elevating her status and desirability in the entertainment industry and among the media and the public. In a broader sense, the event could also serve to advertise a narrative of economic prosperity within the film industry, insinuating to the public and to investors that the Spanish star system was capable of supporting such lavish expenditure. In addition, the event could buttress the meritocracy myth that Suevia Films intended to propagate about Flores to heighten her public image by producing the illusion that she deserved to be admired in an aspirational manner for her merit in achieving stardom through to her own individual talents and hard work.

However, Flores tells a completely different story in her autobiography, in which she recalls how she first met Caracol. While still living in Andalusia, she is introduced to him during a performance at the Villamarta Theatre in Jerez. Their simple handshake triggers an intense emotional response: “Something very strong shook my body and senses internally” (*El coraje*). Her love-at-first-sight for Caracol—a married man, twenty years her senior—becomes the hidden force behind major life decisions, such as her insistence that her family move to Madrid. She frames this move as a career decision, but in reality, it is a pursuit of romantic love. This dynamic establishes a pattern in which her aspirations, choices, and sacrifices are dictated by men, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s fate is not in her own hands but shaped by emotional devotion to family and male figures.

Her family finances their relocation to Madrid with the fifty thousand pesetas that Pedro collects from transferring ownership of his bar, but economic security quickly slips away.¹⁹ In Madrid, Pedro struggles to find stable work, eventually taking a poorly paid job frying fish, which barely sustains them. To put food on the table, her mother is forced to beg, and Flores herself must beg as well—even steal, though she clarifies that she later returned what she had taken. Despite believing that women should remain virgins until marriage, Flores does not arrive at matrimony as a virgin. She frames the loss of her virginity as an accident of fate: “But fate planned what my mother feared, and [. . .] I made love for the first time in my life” (*El coraje*). This phrasing absolves her of agency, making it seem as though external forces dictated her actions rather than her own choices or circumstances.

However, her narrative reveals a deeper reality: she coldly decides to relinquish her virtue—“The only thing I have, my treasure” (138)—to free herself and be able to sell her body to secure financial stability for her family: “I was thinking coldly: this way, I have a clear path to achieve what I am seeking—raising money to help my family” (189). She seduces a wealthy man named Alfonso, not out of sexual desire, but out of duty: “I was keen on resisting [. . .], until one day he said, ‘Do you need money?’ and I said, ‘Yes, fifty thousand pesetas’” (*El coraje*). In exchange for her sexual services, she asks for no more

than what she feels she owes her family and carries out the “contract”: “I pretended to be a virgin [...], played the modest girl—it was part of the deal” (192). This act reinforces the *mater dolorosa* ideal, as Flores subordinates her personal desires to the survival of her loved ones. Francoist norms dictated that women should prioritize the needs of others in her family over their own aspirations, and Flores’s actions reflect this perfectly, since she herself declares “What I really wanted was something else. Someone who would take me to church, give me children, and offer me security—a home, just as it is written. Someone who would allow me to walk around with my head held high” (218). Her economic dealings with Alfonso are deliberately contrasted with her heart’s unfulfilled longing for Caracol: “I was his, although I would have rather been with someone else [Caracol] instead” (*El Coraje*). This juxtaposition frames her sexual sacrifice not as a selfish act but as an act of tragic necessity, elevating her suffering to a higher moral plane.

Framed as uncontrollable, her love for Caracol compels her to negotiate a way to be with him: “[Alfonso] told me he liked me [...], and [...] wanted to create a show where I would be the lead. I accepted, but with one condition: he had to hire the best singer in Spain, Manolo Caracol, so that I could give my best in my dance” (*El coraje*). She emphasizes “I was the one who hired Caracol, not him hiring me, as has been said many times” (196), although in reality, he controls every single aspect of the production, from artistic direction to logistical and aesthetic details such as the selection of “curtains, drapes, and everyone’s costumes” (199). The same power dynamic plays out in their intimate relationship, where she is nothing more than “the shadow of his light” (198). Caracol is portrayed as a flamenco genius with an exceptionally strong personality—“His personality, his genius, was what made him different”—, terribly ambitious—“He always wanted to be the first”—, and ruled by desire and intense emotions: “He was wild, intuitive, marvelous [...], a hurricane, a volcano, a mad wind” (198-99). He is also depicted as hyper-virile, an experienced womanizer, and dangerously seductive: “He knew all the tricks, he was a great artist, he was a danger” (187).

Caracol embodies the stereotype of the Latin lover, a highly racialized construct that both romanticizes and constrains Latino and Mediterranean masculinity. This depiction taps into additional stereotypes associated with gypsy people, unfairly stereotyped in media and popular culture as being inherently more passionate, free-spirited, or untamed. When these traits are exaggerated and depicted negatively—as in the case of Caracol, who is described as possessive, excessively jealous, and prone to substance abuse and violence—it reinforces harmful racial stereotypes that suggest a natural disposition towards such behaviors among gypsy men. This not only limits the representation of complex and diverse individuals within the gypsy community but also perpetuates a narrow and negative view that can affect societal attitudes and reinforce discrimination and racism.

Even if Flores is perfectly aware that Caracol knows “all the tricks” and is a “danger”, she cannot control her feelings, describing herself as “blindly” in love or “bewitched” by him, and insisting “he intoxicated me with his immense strength [...] and took me [...] wherever he wanted” (207). Flores gestures that her turbulent affair with Caracol fascinated the public: “We were a legend [...]. People vibrated with us, we filled theaters, we were their idols [...]. After the two performances, every night turned into a spree, and alcohol flowed like a river. The truth is that with Caracol, I drank more than I wanted to” (*El coraje*). She does not blame herself for her indulgence in this frenzied lifestyle but instead holds Caracol responsible: “What I did was not what I wanted to do, but what he wanted me to do” (207). Their relationship is framed as tumultuous, passionate, and violent, reinforcing the myth of romantic love, a construct that presents fierce emotions as signs of deep passion: “We lived a violent and wonderful life” (202). However, according to Flores, Caracol is so jealous that he becomes physically violent when he imagines that he might be losing

control of her: “He abused me. Oh, what my parents suffered! And my dear brother said to me: ‘Leave that man, Lola, leave him, he will be your ruin! Please, Lola, leave him!’ But I could not leave him [...]: I was completely in love with the man and the artist” (*El coraje*). Within the SF’s framework, Flores’s experience with Caracol becomes a cautionary tale: a woman who does not moderate her emotions and impulses will inevitably suffer the consequences. Flores’s painful experience serves to “tame” her fiery feelings, eventually causing her to resign her illusion of love as eternally full of passion and excitement in favor of a much more subdued and socially sanctioned role.

On 28 October 2021, Movistar+ premiered the documentary series *Lola* exploring the life and career of Flores and featuring countless artists, music experts, and friends, as well as her daughters Lolita and Rosario, and her sister Carmen. The production dedicated a section to highlighting Flores’s tumultuous relationship with Caracol, reiterating his portrayal as an abuser. This sparked a reaction from Caracol’s family, who expressed their anger, claiming that Caracol never mistreated Flores. Caracol died in a car accident on 24 February 1973. In her autobiography, Flores states that she is not taking advantage of the fact that Caracol is dead to paint him as an abuser, arguing that he “would not have objected” to her narrative, further explaining that “those things weren’t mentioned in newspapers back then [...]. But he hit me, and I have to confess it” (203). However, as published in *El diario* on 12 December 2021, Caracol’s granddaughter, Salomé Pavón, complained about how “Caracol is being ‘defamed,’ labeled as an alcoholic, drug addict, womanizer, and abuser in order to spice up Lola Flores’s biography with lurid and sensational elements” (*eldiario.es*), as is also the case with the series aired on Movistar.

In reality, Caracol’s depiction is not meant simply to “spice up” her autobiography. Even after her abuse, Flores remains with him, claiming that she loved him too much to leave him. This framing is critical: it reinforces the myth of passionate love as a force beyond reason or self-preservation, romanticizing women’s suffering as an inherent aspect of their sentimental life. By portraying love as women’s “natural” calling, her narrative upholds the idea that women must endure pain and emotional turmoil as part of learning their “true” role in relationships: selflessness, modesty, and service to others. Her narrative elevates her pain to a universal plane, positioning it as the moral and emotional core of her life story. However, this suffering is not an inherent aspect of love—it is the direct result of the patriarchal constraints that she does not question. Instead of recognizing that her subjugation to Caracol is as a result of having interiorized the construct of romantic love as the “natural” manner to love, she presents her devotion and suffering as inevitable, reinforcing the very structures that oppress her.

Flores finally finds the strength to leave Caracol, though only when her brother dies (211). This suggests that even in her most painful relationships, it is not her own well-being that prompts action but external tragedy. Her story does not depict leaving an abusive partner as an act of self-liberation, but as a reaction to another form of suffering—once again positioning pain as the defining force in her decisions. Her subsequent relationships are not framed as opportunities for self-fulfillment, but as attempts to heal from the wounds of her painful affair with Caracol: “one ardent nail drives out another” (216). This reinforces another deeply ingrained patriarchal expectation: that a woman’s healing must come through men rather than through independence.

12. Resigned Relationship with Antonio González

Despite achieving remarkable professional success, Flores does not present her artistic career as a source of personal fulfillment. Instead, she frames love, marriage, and motherhood as the ultimate markers of a woman’s worth. When she seemingly possesses everything a woman could desire: “beauty, fame, money, and lovers”, she presents herself

as feeling “bored” rather than “fulfilled” (*El coraje*), implying that her life lacks meaning because she has not yet built her own family: “I always had the firm idea of wanting to be a mother, but I did not want to have children until I got married in the Church” (*El coraje*). Public life is thus depicted as superficial and incomplete without the moral sanctity of family, reinforcing the Francoist vision of the woman as the pillar of the household. The introduction of Antonio González, her future husband, intensifies this moral trajectory. Flores’s first encounter with González is framed within the love-at-first-sight trope—“our eyes met, and they never forgot each other” (288)—aligning with the myth of romantic destiny. González is depicted as a “very handsome gypsy with black eyes and a romantic air who played the guitar, danced, and sang the Catalan rumba like no one else” (*El Coraje*). The visual and sensual description of González reflects the racialized and exoticized “gypsy” stereotype, portraying him as both romantic and enigmatic, in whose “genetic makeup is the talent to play the guitar inherited from his father” (165), as Garzón emphasizes, bolstering biological determinism.

This depiction heightens the narrative tension when it is revealed that González is already committed to a pregnant gypsy woman, turning his prior engagement into an obstacle to Flores’s romantic fulfillment. Her declaration—“I was free, and this time I could not make a mistake: I had to play all my cards right” (*El Coraje*)—underscores her strategic surrender of agency, as she devises a calculated plan to secure González’s loyalty through pregnancy. However, this choice is not framed as manipulative, but rather as a rational act of survival within a patriarchal framework: although she knew he was volatile—during a trip to Rome she already caught González and a Spanish model “exchanging glances. . . [. . .] as if saying ‘I like you’ with their eyes” (296)—she played all her cards because she “liked him a lot” (289), though especially because securing a man equates to stability and moral legitimacy, allowing women to walk through life with their “head held high”. Her strategy succeeds, and they marry “in the Church”, seemingly fulfilling her ideal aspirations: “My wish had come true, what I had always dreamed of [. . .], beyond all pain, all hardships, all sorrow [. . .], after this harsh and tremendous life I had lived, I had finally crossed the threshold of my legal marriage in the Church” (304). She further emphasizes how González completes her: “Antonio suddenly made me the happiest woman in the world, [. . .], the most fulfilled. He made me touch the sky, the moon, and the stars with my hands” (306). Even more than marriage, motherhood cements her sense of fulfillment: “I was going to be a mother! I was expecting a child and was the happiest woman in the world, I was full of light and happiness” (*El coraje*).

However, betrayal reappears even within this seemingly perfect resolution, demonstrating that passionate love is not eternal. Betrayal also serves to emphasize the stereotype of the unfaithful gypsy husband, reinforcing problematic racialized assumptions that tie ethnicity to morality and behavior, echoing the racist ideologies of the Franco regime.²⁰ As expected, González is eventually attracted to another woman. Naturally, this sparks jealousy and conflict, eroding Flores’s sense of self-worth and contentment: “I saw some glances between them [. . .], she [the other woman] seemed to enjoy humiliating me. Jealousy was consuming me [. . .]. I spoke with Antonio [. . .], he told me that I was crazy, that I was a fantasist” (*El coraje*). The narrative underscores Flores’s lack of control over her husband, emphasizing that her beauty and efforts to maintain stability within the family are ultimately insufficient: “One afternoon, [. . .] the other [woman] looked at me [. . .], I said to her: ‘What are you looking at? You are surely envious because I am prettier than you. She [. . .] said: ‘Lola, you are worth nothing!’ I continued the tour for my three children and the company until the end of the contract” (*El coraje*). Here, the narrative teaches a broader ideological lesson, given that her humiliation ultimately forces her to fully accept the role

dictated by the SF: modesty, submission, self-sacrifice, and endurance. Her final realization marks the complete transformation of her romantic idealism into resigned acceptance:

The passion I felt for him [Antonio] was gone [. . .]. Then, there was affection, understanding, the struggle for life, living under the same roof, and thinking that I would be by his side until the end of my existence. But I felt a great sorrow for having to bury the madness I felt for him deep within me! Antonio did not realize the kind of woman I am, for better or for worse. (*El coraje*)

In Francoist ideology and Catholic teachings, a spiritually strong woman is expected to accept humiliation, suffering, and personal sacrifice as a means of demonstrating her virtue, humility, and devotion to her family. This aligns with the *mater dolorosa* ideal, where endurance of pain is seen as a form of moral and spiritual fortitude. However, from a feminist perspective, a woman might still exhibit spiritual resilience when facing hardship, but this strength would manifest through mature self-respect and empowerment rather than compliance with the *mater dolorosa* ideal. Flores's narrative ultimately serves to disempower women by reinforcing the idea that true feminine strength lies in endurance, self-sacrifice, and the acceptance of suffering, rather than in agency, independence, or self-assertion. By framing humiliation, betrayal, and personal pain as necessary trials on the path to virtue, her story upholds the Francoist ideal of the submissive, self-sacrificing woman, whose worth is measured by her ability to suppress her desires and prioritize her family above all else. Flores's narrative reinforces patriarchal structures that keep women bound to traditional roles, rather than encouraging them to seek empowerment, autonomy, or equality.

13. Overprotective Motherhood

Instead of presenting her career as the pinnacle of her achievements, Flores's narrative glorifies marriage and motherhood as the true fulfillment of her feminine destiny. She claims to have given birth to her three children in a "natural" way, without medical intervention—"without the *gota a gota*" (drop by drop)—as dictated by the sacred scriptures: "You will give birth to your children with the pain of your womb" (309). Her motherhood is framed as a test of strength and sacrifice, reinforcing her identity as a provider who has sustained her family through sheer perseverance. She emphasizes that she has fed her children with "my sweat and my labor" (311), assuming the "double burden" of both the maternal and paternal roles: "because [. . .] the one who has earned the real money in this house, from the very beginning, has been me" (310). Despite her financial capabilities, Flores adheres to traditional gender hierarchies, ensuring that her husband's authority remains intact. In her home, "the first plate of food is for my husband, no matter what" (291). She embraces her role as a "*madraza*" (337), constantly keeping an eye on everything her children do, unable to suppress her maternal vigilance. Her devotion extends beyond obligation; she takes immense pride in her children, portraying them as naturally gifted, as if their artistic talents were predestined. From infancy, she insists, "you could already tell" that Lolita "was going to be an artist" (317).

Flores's perspective on love is deeply moralistic, reinforcing traditional ideals of familial devotion and emotional duty. She frames love as a universal solution, having taught her daughter that "love is what solves all problems" (315). Her affection for her children is not only rooted in her (presumed) maternal instinct but also in their moral righteousness, emphasizing that she loves them not only because they are her children but because they are "good, very good with their parents" (339). This self-sacrificing vision of motherhood perfectly aligns with Francoist values, which positioned women as the moral backbone of the family and, by extension, the nation. By highlighting pain, labor, and devotion as essential aspects of motherhood, Flores reinforces the Catholic ideal

of the suffering yet dutiful mother, who prioritizes the well-being of her husband and children above all else. Her insistence on maternal vigilance and obedience within the household structure reflects the regime's broader expectations: that women should be selfless caregivers, unwavering in their duty to maintain family stability, and ultimately, the social order dictated by the state.

14. Defending from Accusations While Reinforcing Francoist Values

Flores's 1990s autobiography is deliberately crafted to rehabilitate her star persona by using the myth of the *mater dolorosa*—framing herself as the embodiment of the suffering yet virtuous woman—while still perpetuating the regime's oppressive ideology. When addressing her tax evasion, Flores openly admits that she has never paid taxes in her life but insists that this is not out of deception: "I didn't want to deceive anyone, neither the government nor the Spanish people" (415). She attributes her failure to pay taxes to mere absentmindedness, claiming "I was in my own world, singing, dancing, pouring my life out on stage, without even knowing how much money came in or went out of my pockets" (416). She further insists that she "didn't know that this could be punished" (419), arguing that she has been unfairly singled out as an "example" to the public, even though she is "just a worker, a worker of the arts, but a worker nonetheless" (348), and is living in debt—"my life is a mortgage"—yet "where I am truly rich is in the love of my people" (312).

By emphasizing her "distraction" and presenting herself as an artist wholly absorbed in her craft, Flores portrays herself as a humble, hard-working individual, disconnected from financial and bureaucratic systems. This self-characterization aligns with the Francoist ideal of the apolitical, loyal citizen, whose only duty is to fulfill their social role (in this case, as a cultural ambassador for Spain). By distancing herself from intentional wrongdoing, she reinforces Francoist values of obedience, humility, and national loyalty while avoiding personal accountability. Her tax evasion threatened to dismantle her image as a patriotic and morally upright national figure. However, instead of allowing the scandal to define her, she strategically rebrands herself as a victim, employing the *mater dolorosa* framework to deflect blame and regain public sympathy. She frames the scandal as a misunderstanding, not a deliberate crime, emphasizing her lack of formal education and financial literacy. She presents herself as a hardworking mother who has always struggled to provide for her family, reinforcing the idea that she was too busy fighting for survival to worry about bureaucratic matters. Her infamous televised plea—"If each Spaniard gave me a peseta, I could pay off my debt!"—was not just an act of desperation: instead of being perceived as a wealthy celebrity benefited by the system, Flores recast herself as a struggling artist, unfairly targeted by an unforgiving system, transforming public outrage into sympathy.

Flores similarly addresses accusations of being a Francoist, firmly denying them: "I have not been, I am not, nor will I be a Francoist [. . .]. I belong to the party that feeds me and my children" (347). This claim functions as both a deflection and an affirmation: it denies explicit allegiance to Francoism while reinforcing the Francoist worldview, in which loyalty to the regime was synonymous with protecting one's family. She emphasizes that "I never asked Franco for anything", contrasting herself with "many of my artist friends" who "asked him for a car [. . .]. And Franco granted it to them, and later they sold it and spent the money" (347). The only thing Franco ever gave her, she declares, is "the Cross of Isabella the Catholic" (347). Her claim that she only received this symbolic recognition, rather than material rewards like other artists, reinforces her image as a self-made artist who succeeded through talent and effort rather than state favoritism.

However, this recognition was itself a Francoist tool—aligning her star persona with the regime's political goals: "Most illustrious lady—said the Minister and Secretary General of the Movement José Solís Ruiz—by official decree such a high distinction has been

granted to you for having carried the flight of your art to foreign lands and, moreover, for having brought the truth of Spain, dispelling doubts and inspiring enthusiasm” (Garzón 207). This statement underscores the ideological role that Flores played in Francoist Spain as a cultural ambassador who exported a carefully curated vision of Spanish identity to international audiences. The recognition does not merely celebrate her artistic achievements but explicitly ties her success abroad to her ability to represent Spain in a way that aligns with the regime’s nationalist agenda. The phrase “dispelled doubts” implies that her presence abroad helped counteract negative perceptions of Spain, particularly those associated with Franco’s authoritarian rule. Similarly, “provoking enthusiasm” suggests that her performances served to generate admiration and pride in Spain’s cultural heritage, reinforcing the regime’s efforts to promote a romanticized, apolitical image of the country through its artists. Thus, while Flores denies being a Francoist, her reframing of her life story subtly reaffirms Francoist values and cultural control over artists, portraying herself not as the regime’s spokesperson, but as a faithful and compliant cultural icon.

15. Conclusions

By continuously aligning herself with Spanish cultural heritage, Flores made herself indispensable to national identity, making it difficult for either the public or the authorities to fully condemn her. Her narrative of suffering and endurance positioned her as a symbol of Spanish resilience, allowing her to claim that she was being persecuted despite her immense contributions to Spain’s cultural legacy. She linked her struggles to those of the common people, portraying herself as a working-class woman who, despite her fame, remained deeply connected to the Spanish *pueblo*. Her redemption arc through marriage, motherhood, and suffering mirrored the Catholic-Francoist notion of redemptive suffering, presenting her as a morally and spiritually purified figure. Ultimately, Flores’s embrace of the *mater dolorosa* archetype allowed her to sideline political accusations, deflect the tax scandal, and redeem her public image. Rather than being perceived as a Francoist cultural figure or a tax evader, she rebranded herself as a devoted mother, a self-sacrificing woman, and a national treasure whose suffering made her all the more authentic and beloved. By framing her personal struggles as a shield against political critique, Flores preserved her legacy, ensuring that she would be remembered not as a privileged artist complicit in Francoist propaganda, nor as a figure of financial scandal, but as one of Spain’s most enduring and untouchable icons.

Everything we have discussed raises a fundamental question: who was Lola Flores beyond her star persona? If all we know about her comes from a narrative crafted by Suevia Films, reinforced by Francoist cultural propaganda, and later reframed through the myth of the *mater dolorosa*, then we are left with a paradox—was there ever a “real” Lola Flores, or was she entirely a product of external forces? Flores herself was surely not the driving force behind the rebranding of her persona but rather a figure shaped by a network of ultraconservative elites who molded her into the perfect Spanish icon. Initially, Suevia Films played a pivotal role in constructing her meritocratic myth, ensuring that her image aligned with Francoist National Catholicism, positioning her as a cultural ambassador for the regime. However, this institutional shaping did not end with the Francoist period. Flores herself consented to participate in perpetuating this narrative that repurposed it as the *mater dolorosa* myth to shield herself from accusations of Francoist complicity and financial misconduct while preserving her legacy. Her 1990s autobiography—which emphasizes suffering, endurance, and devotion to family over personal ambition or political involvement—mirrors the very discourse that had been used to construct her star image decades earlier. The fact that her legacy remains dominated by this mythic construction, rather than an exploration of her authentic self, underscores the enduring power of the

ultraconservative institutions that shaped it. In this way, Flores's life was not a personal journey but a larger ideological construct, designed to ensure her continued place in Spain's collective memory as a symbol of sacrifice, endurance, and unwavering national identity.

In the end, therefore, we must ask again, if Flores never had full control over her own identity, if she was always, first and foremost, a product of the narratives imposed upon her, then who is the star herself? This woman might have existed, yet what endures is the star persona—one that continues to propagate and perpetuate the oppressive values of Spain's right-wing militancy. Of course, Flores was not the only accomplice in this carefully curated montage. Medina and the rest of the figures who populate her autobiography also had to perform their assigned roles for the media. Their participation was not passive inclusion but rather active engagement in reinforcing a scripted version of events—one that framed Flores as an icon of national identity, sacrifice, and ultraconservative values. By adhering to this constructed narrative, these individuals contributed to the illusion of authenticity, making Flores's life story appear spontaneous and truthful, when in reality, it was a carefully orchestrated performance designed to propagate and perpetuate Francoist patriarchal and nationalist ideologies under the guise of entertainment.

The Flores family can even be compared to the Kardashians in terms of multigenerational fame, media presence, and strategic self-mythologization. Both families have successfully leveraged their personal lives as part of their brand, turning their narratives into cultural commodities that sustain their public image. Certainly, key differences exist. While the Kardashians built their empire within the framework of American reality TV, social media, and consumer culture, the Flores family emerged under the shadow of Francoist Spain, where Lola Flores was constructed as a national symbol of Spanish identity. The Flores family legacy is rooted in artistic performance—flamenco, music, and film—whereas the Kardashians' influence is more tied to entrepreneurship, fashion, and celebrity culture. Despite these differences, both families blur the line between public and private life, carefully curating their image while transforming romance, family, and even scandal into a spectacle that reinforces their cultural relevance, and define one kind of culture as superior over others.

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Notes

- ¹ In this essay, all the quoted sources that were originally in Spanish have been translated into English. The translations are mine.
- ² Cesáreo González, the Galician entrepreneur who managed to turn Suevia Films into an American-style star system during the previous years of the Franco regime, had the protection of the Generalissimo, for whom the empresario was "the most suitable man to carry out the controlled opening of Spanish cinema abroad" (García-Garzón 2005, p. 83). It has been widely recognized that González inserted hidden propaganda in the popular movie genres that he cultivated, such as "urban melodrama, [...] romantic comedy with box-office hit potential, [...] folkloric film [...], and the historical epic" (Cerdán 2012, p. 418). Flores's contract to perform in shows and movies produced or coproduced in both Spain and Latin America included her participation in all marketing campaigns, which strongly suggests that her agreement covered two distinct legal entities, like the US star systems' contracts, which covered "the private person of the performer and the star's image", thus determining the industries' right to control and market the star's identity, including the "star's acts, poses, plays, and appearances" (McDonald 2000, p. 6).
- ³ At the time, the Franco regime was opening Spain to tourism, thus shifting from the strict autarchy and economic isolation of the 1930s and 1940s to liberalization, securing international recognition, and maintaining political control through repression, all while upholding conservative Catholic values. Scholars such as Neal M. Rosendorf (2014) have analyzed how the dictatorship, leveraging Spain's strategic position, utilized it as a bulwark against communism to mend its past years of autarchy and isolation. Aligning with the USA during the Cold War, the Franco regime aimed for international acceptance or, at minimum, European

tolerance, relying heavily on America's support. Franco's administration implemented soft power strategies, such as waiving visa requirements for American tourists in 1952 and promoting Spanish tourism in the USA from as early as 1948. Establishing the Ministry of Information and Tourism in 1951 and launching a National Tourism Plan in 1953, which included welcoming Hilton's first hotel outside the USA in Madrid, illustrated his approach to fostering informal international relations to enhance Spain's image. The regime's 'Hollywood in Madrid strategy', in Rosendorf's terms, attracted Hollywood stars, legitimizing Franco's Spain as an open and business-friendly environment. This dual approach of offering strategic military bases to the US while portraying Spain as a tourist destination was a sophisticated blend of hard and soft diplomacy. The campaign to make Spain appealing to tourists and filmmakers, especially from Britain and America, highlighted Spain's cultural and scenic beauty through films like *El Cid* and *Around the World in 80 Days*, turning Spain into a cultural and tourist hotspot. To bolster tourism and the economy, the Franco regime decided to also capitalize on flamenco, a popular folkloric music genre associated with *Andalucía*, promoting it through diverse means such as films, performances, and tourism campaigns (Holguin 2019).

4 This was precisely the dual purpose for the establishment of the Ministry of Information and Tourism in 1951: "on the one hand, to open Spain to tourism, facilitating the influx of foreign currency and improving the regime's international image; on the other, to maintain ideological censorship to ensure that this openness did not undermine the foundational pillars of the dictatorship" (Carnicé Mur and Elduque 2024).

5 For Spencer, wealth, status, and power are indicators of strength, while poverty and failure are evidence of weakness. His ideology is widely interpreted as a reaction to the anxieties produced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the principles of liberty, equality, and solidarity. Spencer's ideology provides a justification for maintaining social hierarchies, portraying them as the inevitable result of evolution rather than structural oppression or inequality. Spencer argues that aiding the "unfit" weakens society by interfering with natural selection. This perspective absolves the privileged of any responsibility to assist the less fortunate, opposing the Enlightenment's emphasis on collective welfare and cooperation. Spencer emphasizes individual competition over collective progress, positioning personal success as a reflection of inherent superiority, in contrast to the Enlightenment's focus on shared rights and responsibilities. By framing social outcomes as the result of evolutionary laws, Spencer legitimizes existing power dynamics, reassuring elites that their privilege is not only justified but beneficial for societal progress, countering the Enlightenment's critique of hereditary and economic privilege. Spencer's ideology was used by fascist powers to legitimize social hierarchies, colonialism, and eugenics, suggesting that societal inequalities reflect natural selection (Lema Añón 2007; González Vicén 1984).

6 Ferrer supports Medina's claim by stating that Flores "became ingrained in both personal and collective memory through an overwhelming and inexhaustible sincerity, which starkly contrasted with the artificial hypocrisy of the regime and the very society that made up its audience" (286).

7 In *El coraje*, Flores does not need Medina as a mediator because the series employs direct address and visual framing techniques that create an illusion of authenticity without requiring an external narrator. While Medina's book mimics Flores's speech patterns to make it seem as though the star is speaking in her own voice, *El coraje* achieves a stronger effect by presenting Flores herself speaking directly to the camera in a casual, conversational tone. This unmediated presentation fosters a sense of intimacy, making viewers feel as though they are hearing her true, unfiltered thoughts rather than a curated biography. The set design of *El coraje* reinforces this authenticity, depicting Flores in what appears to be her home office, a familiar and personal space. This setting, combined with archival footage, photographs, videos, and memorabilia, bridges the gap between simulacrum and reality. Just as Medina's book contextualizes Flores's experiences within cultural and historical events to make them feel more believable, the television series integrates testimonies from people who presumably knew her from her early years to validate her story. Moreover, Flores's story had already been validated by Medina and by the media during the four years before *El coraje*, further eliminating the need for a mediator. By the time of the series, her star's life story had been extensively reaffirmed through television and press coverage. Her narrative was no longer in need of editorial structuring—it had already been accepted as part of Spain's collective memory. The series capitalizes on this, presenting Flores as the sole authority over her life story, reinforcing the illusion that she is speaking without external influence and making *El coraje* feel even more personal and definitive.

8 In this sense, her persona evokes the protagonists of the folkloric theater and films of the Republican period (1931–1939). Also inspired by the stereotype of Carmen, these folkloric heroines were already infused with a Christian morality that steered them away from becoming a *femme fatale*. In these productions, the Carmen-like heroine was typically depicted as an embodiment of virtue and purity, whose ultimate fulfillment was found in a romantic relationship leading to marriage with the man who was the key to their eternal happiness. The plots of these productions frequently resembled a version of *Cinderella*: the gypsy heroine "falls in love with a man who occupies an important position within the community [...], distances herself from her roots, and adopts the dominant culture [...]: the 'tamed' Romani woman comes to participate in the majority society and enriches it with her grace" (Zmidakova n.d.). While not overtly political, these productions served as allegories for broader national concerns, including unity and the struggle between different ethnic, regional, or class identities within Spain. Love overcoming barriers was often a metaphor for the desired reconciliation between conflicting factions within the country. In fact, several movies starred by Flores follow a similar formula, presenting love stories "which often include interracial marriage as a recurring

resolution. The gitana typically falls in love with men whose nobility or social status symbolizes whitening, whether by erasing the stigma or the inherent otherness associated with race in the Francoist context (*La niña de la venta*, *Limosna de amores*, ¡Ay, pena, penita, pena!), as well as the redemption of the character's sinful past (*Estrella de Sierra Morena*)" (Carnicé Mur and Elduque 2024). However, Flores's autobiography aligns with the SF's ideology, in which the model of romantic love is rejected because this model's promotion of passion and desire could potentially lead to partnerships that cross political, ethnic, and class boundaries, threatening the hierarchical racial order imposed by Franco's regime. Since Flores is framed as "black", she is restricted from falling in love with white men, and is instead paired with the gypsy men who are depicted as great flamenco artists yet "naturally" wild and unstable (an inherent "danger" for women).

In the preface of Garzón's biography, the writer Terenci Moix states that Flores's survival as a movie star constituted an "authentic miracle since over three decades the producers did not offer her a good film even by chance" (14). Like for Garzón (310), for Moix, filmmakers wasted Flores's artistic talents, since she "could have found an exceptional place in a cinema capable of extracting the popular vigor that she carried within her" (14). However, it seems that she became typecast: her image as a *folclórica* reinforced specific expectations about the kinds of roles she could play and the personal characteristics she could exhibit, making it difficult for filmmakers to imagine that she could perform other roles or display other attributes.

For example, the *Ley de Vagos y Maleantes* (Law of Vagrants and Criminals) disproportionately targeted the gitano communities, whose mobility and cultural practices were viewed as threats to the regime's vision of a unified Spain.

Uniting the beads in a rosary tread is symbolically more than just forming a physical "collar" of beads. The rosary itself is a structured object of Catholic devotion, where each bead represents a specific prayer. As a whole, the rosary constitutes a narrative tool, symbolizing the autobiography's unity, order, and completion within the framework of Catholic faith. The name of Flores's mother, Rosario, symbolizes her Catholic devotion.

Ferrer supports Medina's argument when declaring "The vicissitudes of history and the artistic biography of Lola Flores can be interpreted, with little margin for error, as a key to understanding the very upheavals that have shaken Spain's history from the Civil War to nearly the end of the century" (289).

Medina presents the sun as the "star that follows Lola. On *Calle del Sol* [...] she came into the world; on *Calle del Sol*, she was stolen her first kiss [...], and under the sun of Santo Domingo, Marbella, or wherever it may be, Lola feels at ease" (73).

The *mater dolorosa* is often depicted with a sorrowful expression, tears streaming down her face, and a heart pierced by seven swords, representing the Seven Sorrows of Mary. These sorrows recount the most painful moments of her life, aligning her suffering with her role as co-redeemer alongside Christ. In *El coraje*, just after narrating the moment of her birth in Jerez, Flores is shown as being back in her (presumed) native city, where she walks to church and prays in front of the Crucified Christ with tears streaming down her face, a visual image subtly meant to suggest a parallelism between her and the *mater dolorosa* from the beginning of the series. To reinforce this parallelism, Flores is then shown attending—also with tears streaming down her face—the Holy Week procession in Seville, when the statues of the *mater dolorosa* and Christ are carried through the streets, adorned with rich garments and symbols of mourning. In *El coraje*, Flores is wearing a different sophisticated and colorful outfit in each montage sequence. However, during the procession's vignette, Flores is dressed in a formal long-sleeved, floor-length, black dress and a *mantilla*, a lace veil worn over a high comb or *peineta* to frame her face. This outfit conveys her solemn reverence to the sacred figures being transported among the people of Seville while a singer is singing the *saeta* "*El Cristo de los gitanos*". These images seem clearly intended to subtly shape the audience's perception, reinforcing Flores's portrayal as symbolizing the archetype of the *mater dolorosa* in her offstage life.

The word "duende" is difficult to translate directly, as it sometimes refers to a mystical, almost supernatural artistic inspiration, particularly in flamenco and other expressive arts, yet it also refers to artistic genius, emotional depth, or raw creative force (Cansinos Asséns 1985; García Lorca 1998).

Ferrer acknowledges that Flores's "racial physiognomy" associates her with "a certain type of gypsy woman, with distinct racial features—dark-skinned, dark-eyed, tanned complexion, strong temperament—that clearly signal her origins, which are none other than that of the old flamenco Spain of Carmen. A Spain that was now once again taking to the stage and cinema screens as the unmistakable bearer of that famous advertising slogan, 'Spain is different' [...], aimed at promoting the peninsula's exoticism" (224). However, Ferrer does not interpret Flores's "black" skin color as an act of appropriation and racialization. Instead, like Garzón, he views her racialized features as natural, insisting that her flamenco performances allow audiences to "contemplate her interpretive abilities and the strength of her racial features, interwoven with the strands of her heated black mane and her expressive arms raised in the air" (230). By framing Flores's racialized physiognomy as an inherent trait rather than a strategic performance shaped by cultural and political forces, Garzón and Ferrer ultimately reinforce the exoticized perception of Flores rather than interrogating its ideological function.

Indeed, while Garzón describes in detail Flores's familial and romantic relationships, he does not examine their gendered dynamics, viewing and presenting them as "natural", rather than constructed. Meanwhile, Ferrer mainly focuses on her onstage life story, clarifying "Her intimate and personal story is not the interest of these pages" (289). Despite these omissions, both authors celebrate Flores as a sexually liberated "modern" woman. Garzón claims that "in the prudish and oppressive atmosphere

of the long postwar period in Spain, [Flores] never hid her amorous freedom and gave ample reason for the guardians of orthodoxy to tear their garments" (123). Ferrer argues that Flores challenged "the respectability of the traditional woman to consolidate female independence in male-controlled public spheres (87). Yet, how do they arrive at this conclusion without examining how Flores portrays her and the other characters' gender performances in her offstage life? Ferrer argues that it does not matter if her offstage identity—her identity "outside of theater and film"—was "more a character of fiction than of reality", since what truly matters is "the emotional and affective impact she had on all of Spanish society, especially among the popular classes of the 1940s and 1950s" (281). This impact, he declares, requires "a change of perspective": "The analytical and testimonial gaze loses importance in favor of the gaze of the consumer of cultural heritage" (282). This gives the impression that he is interpreting Flores's legacy through the lens of "the popular classes". However, he is rather aligning with the ultraconservative elites by avoiding examining the propagandistic techniques embedded in Flores's narrative, particularly the use of monologue and framing. Instead of critically engaging with how her narrative constructs a carefully curated self-image that aligns with Francoist oppressive ideals, Ferrer shifts the focus to her emotional impact on the popular classes, avoiding critiquing the portrayal of Flores's offstage persona as a manufactured product of the regime's patriarchal messaging.

18 The presence of the NO DO cameras during the signing of the agreement further substantiates the view of González as a man connected to the Franco regime (García Fernández 1985, 1998, 2003, 2006; Durán 2003; Castro de Paz and Arcos 2005; García-Garzón 2005).

19 In *Lola en carne viva*, the amount collected by her father is not fifty thousand but ten thousand pesetas.

20 As I have demonstrated, already in the 1940s, the Spanish Novel Prize-winner Camilo José Cela denounced Francoist racist ideology in his short story "Marcelo Brito" (1945) and in his 1942 masterpiece *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (Mizrahi and Liashchynskaya 2023). During the dictatorship, Laforet also condemned the regime's racism in *Al volver la esquina*, posthumously published in 2004 (Mizrahi 2022).

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