

RESISTING INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD: NAJWA NIMRI IN SPANISH TELEVISION FICTION SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

Najwa Nimri is a Spanish actress and singer who has been working since the late 1990s with directors such as Daniel Calparsoro, Alejandro Amenábar and Julio Medem, although it is in her roles as atypical violent mothers in television fiction series that she has recently made a name for herself. In 2015, she began portraying Zulema Zahir, a murderous, amoral mother in the series *Locked Up* (*Vis a Vis*, Daniel Écija, Álex Pina, Iván Escobar, Esther Martínez Lobato, Antena 3/Fox: 2015-2019). Zulema is the most dangerous inmate in Cruz del Sur, a women's prison that she repeatedly attempts to escape from throughout the series. A year later, Netflix picked up the Atresmedia/FOX Spain series and produced *Vis a Vis: El Oasis* (Daniel Écija, Álex Pina, Iván Escobar, Esther Martínez Lobato, Netflix: 2020), giving Nimri the opportunity to further develop the character. This spin-off begins with the protagonists

now out of prison, but Zulema joins her former rival, Macarena, to return to a life of crime. Together, they orchestrate a robbery that not only poses new challenges for the two women but also serves as the pretext for them to strengthen their relationship. Following her successful portrayal of Zulema, Najwa Nimri joined the cast of *Money Heist* (*La casa de papel*, Álex Pina, Antena 3: 2017/Netflix: 2019-2021) for its third season, which would ultimately bring her major international success.¹ The series follows a group of criminals, led by the Professor, who carry out two ambitious heists: the first of the at the Royal Mint of Spain, and the second of the Bank of Spain. Nimri's character, Alicia Sierra, is a pregnant police inspector of dubious morals who commits criminal acts in her efforts to stop the gang of robbers. However, as the series progresses, she develops a relationship with her adversaries. Finally, in 2022, Nimri starred in the series *Holy Family* (*Sagrada Familia*, Manolo Caro, Netflix: 2022-2023) in the role of

Julia Santos, a mother with a dark criminal past who moves with her children to the wealthy Madrid neighbourhood of Fuente del Berro, adopting a false identity in order to be able to escape the country.

The unique nature of the criminal mothers portrayed by Nimri in these three series is in keeping with a film career notable for playing unconventional women, such as her roles in *Jump into the Void* (*Salto al vacío*, Daniel Calparsoro, 1995), *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (*Los amantes del círculo polar*, Julio Medem, 1998), *Quién te cantará* (Carlos Vermut, 2018) and the mother in *The Red Virgin* (*La virgen roja*, Paula Ortiz, 2024). At the same time, she has cultivated an unusual star image as “she does not usually give interviews [...], she does not talk about her private life [...], she does not take a position on public issues, and she does not tend to appear at events or photo ops” (Bianchi, 2024). In fact, Nimri herself has acknowledged her anti-social streak: “I don’t make any effort to get close to people or to make them like me. I think the worst thing people could say about me is that I’m ‘super-nice’” (Bianchi, 2024). This way of asserting herself as an autonomous woman who declares no need for the unconditional admiration of those around her forms part of a personality that breaks with social conventions. Her deep voice with its provocative and mocking tone constitutes one of the “performance signs” (Dyer, 2001: 173) that spectators expect to find in her on-screen characters.² The naturalness of her performances is thus the product of “representational acting” (Naremore, 1990), whereby the actor’s work is concealed to give audiences the impression that the star is “playing herself”, presenting herself in fictional stories just as she is in her everyday life. It is well-known, for example, that Nimri is a single mother, and on more than one occasion, when asked by journalists about her real-life experience as a mother in relation to her violent characters, she has responded with playful and ironic quips.³

Drawing on the framework of star studies developed by Richard Dyer in the late 1970s in his seminal work *Stars* (2001), this article attempts to identify how Nimri offers a non-normative construction of motherhood in her characters in the different Spanish television series mentioned above. Aumont and Marie (1990: 74) warn of the difficulty of analysing actors’ movements because there are so many subtle gestures that could potentially be overlooked. Similarly, Nacache (2003: 189) argues that any attempt to translate into language the “script of gestures” performed by the actors in each scene is likely to prove a fruitlessly descriptive task. In view of the problems associated with examining every movement of Nimri’s performances, this study avoids such exhaustive textual analysis. Instead, the focus will be on her ironic projection in certain gestures and dialogues where her characters enact a resistance to traditional motherhood. Irony is understood here as a “polyphonic enunciation”, as defined by Bruzos Moro (2009), drawing on Ducrot (1986; 1990). Irony fosters a critical distance (Schoentjes, 2001; Hutcheon, 1992), creates ambiguous discourses (Hutcheon, 2005; Frye, 1991; Booth, 1974) and often introduces an absurd perspective (Jankelevitch, 1982; Schoentjes, 2001) to call cultural norms generally considered positive into question (Kreuz, 2020). Nimri’s use of irony is analysed here to identify how she addresses the non-normative quality of her characters in her acting, along the lines taken by Miriam Hansen (1986), Patricia White (Wojcik, 2004) and Virginia Wright Wexman (Wojcik, 2004) in their studies of dissident actors in classical cinema.

The aim of this article is to analyse some of the images of resistance to institutional motherhood (Rich, 1977) enacted by Nimri in *Locked Up*, *Money Heist* and *Holy Family*. According to Adrienne Rich, the good mother is represented in patriarchal mythology as “beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing”, and yet at the same time the woman’s body is considered “impure, corrupt, the

site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, 'the devil's gateway'" (1977: 15). In opposition to these two types of bodies, the patriarchy constructs the reassuring image of the peaceful and servile mother. The "good mother" must love her children unconditionally and find pleasure in motherhood, even when it means she has to suffer (Donath, 2016). This ideal is still conveyed by many female celebrities (Lagerwey, 2017) in advertising and on social media. The *invisibilisation* of the difficulties, contradictions or conflicts that mothers can experience fosters the idea that motherhood is something instinctive, as has been explored extensively in feminist studies (Tubert, 1996; Iribarne, 2010; Herrero Curiel, 2021).

The discourses around the social representation of motherhood contain preestablished ideas that do run counter to women's real lived experience (Herrero Curiel, 2021). In recent years, initiatives such as the Club de Malasmadres [Bad Mothers' Club], created in 2014 to challenge the idealised image of motherhood, along with the rise of fourth-wave feminism in Spain in the past decade (Aguilar Barriga, 2020), have promoted the image of the imperfect mother. The representation of this image in fiction film and television has been analysed by theorists such as Charo Lacalle (2021), Anna Lucia Natale (2020) and Rebecca Feasey (2017). Alternatives to the model of the good mother have also been developed in cinematic narratives where the aggressive action of female protagonists transfigures the qualities of traditional motherhood: Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), *Alien 3* (David Fincher, 1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003) and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2004) and Agathe Rousselle in *Titane* (Julia Ducournau, 2021) are well-known contemporary examples of such attempts to offer new versions of the mother archetype. Similarly, Najwa Nimri complicates

and expands the depiction of the mother in theoretically more realistic contexts than the science fiction worlds inhabited by Weaver's, Thurman's and Rousselle's characters, with the representation of an ambivalent motherhood. This analysis focuses in particular on how Nimri's characters tie the qualities of the good mother together with those of the bad, criminal mother, eschewing the reproduction of the traditional "sacrifice" versus "malevolence" binary (Walters and Harrison, 2014). It is in this attitude of resistance to traditional polarities that Nimri sometimes projects "new" images of motherhood. However, as Andrea Soto Calderón (2023: 74) points out, these images of resistance are not easy to pin down; they are "slippery" and need to be "embraced in their provisionality".⁴ This analysis will therefore focus on images offered by Nimri when she combines the qualities of the "good mother" and the "bad mother", the interstitial moments when she adopts a liminal position "designating what is 'between'. It is neither the 'one' nor the 'other', but somewhere in the middle, like an intermediary, a messenger, an *intermezzo*" (Deleuze, 2006: 164). It is in these interstitial images, between institutional motherhood and the possibility of new subjectivities, that Nimri's characters render visible a "multiple and contradictory" subjectivity, as Teresa de Lauretis famously describes it (1993: 97). From this position of multiplicity, the mothers portrayed by Nimri occupy "spaces on the margins of dominant discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus" (De Lauretis, 1987: 25). Nimri's characters are thus situated in a place of enunciation that has two sides, and that is located, as Hélène Cixous (1995) suggests, between the destruction characteristic of revolution and its capacity for construction.

This article considers, first of all, how Nimri's characters reject the qualities of the "good mother" (Palomar Vereá, 2004); it then identifies the ambivalence of the mother characters she por-

trays, who are situated in a liminal position between the good mother and the bad. This is followed by an exploration of the way Nimri takes the most significant qualities of the good mother to the extreme to evoke the violent nature of institutional motherhood. Finally, the study reveals how the attitude of resistance of Nimri's mother roles *infects* the bodies around her, exposing a subjectivity that expands and resists hegemonic, patriarchal logic. In each section of this article, Nimri's "performance signs" are analysed in relation to her ironic way of performing the text, identifying those signs that reinforce a non-normative construction of motherhood. The ultimate aim is to identify how her characters' behaviours of resistance to institutional motherhood contribute to her characters' "processes of subjectivation" (Rancière, 2006: 21), projecting alternative images of motherhood at given moments.

RESISTANCES TO INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD

One of Nimri's paradigmatic moments of resistance to institutional motherhood can be found in the *Locked Up* episode titled "The Barbie" (#4x01: La Barbie, Marc Vigil, Fox Spain: 2018), when Zulema (Nimri) confesses to the police officer who is taking her to prison that she wouldn't be able to bear the life of a bourgeois mother: "I don't want a job with twelve monthly cheques and two bonuses, a dog with a microchip, two children, a boy and a girl, a 38-year mortgage, holidays in August and a traffic jam on the way to the beach. I don't want to go for a drink on Sundays and a fuck once a week. I love real life." Among the various actions Zulema describes in this monologue, the reference to "a fuck once a week" alludes to her need for unrestricted sexual activity, and her rejection of the institutionalised motherhood described by Rich (1977), associated with women who sacrifice their own desires or with sexual acts performed merely to satisfy their husbands. Rich's character-

isation is identified by Kaplan (1998: 104) in the depiction of mothers in classical Hollywood cinema, whose asexual depiction, the author argues, reflects a need to offer a construction of the female that is not threatening to men. However, in contemporary cinema, with its violent mothers who are usually depicted as dangerous threats to their male enemies, the cinematic archetype has undergone a transfiguration that allows the characters played by Nimri (and the aforementioned Weaver, Thurman and Rousselle) to display their sexual desire unabashedly.

Nimri also resists institutional motherhood by appropriating some of the gestures associated with it. In their study of the myth of contemporary motherhood, Douglas & Michaels (2004) observe that mothers are expected to display a smile of satisfaction as proof of their unquestionable happiness. In an interview with *Fotogramas* (Silvestre, 2022), Nimri explains that her character in *Holy Family* is "a woman who looks like a conventional woman, with a smile," thus acknowledging that her facial expression helped her to "perform" the kind and affectionate mother she was required to play. She also confesses that she would practice the role when she went out with her friends: "I would go out to the café and I would try to pretend to my friends and my boyfriend, and I would ask for things with a friendly smile, and everyone would say to me: 'Why are you acting so weird?'" (Revista !HOLA!, 2022). In this way, Nimri makes it clear that she is aware of the artificial nature of certain gestures of institutional motherhood and forces herself to smile to feign the "good mother" in her role as a criminal mother in *Holy Family*. In a highly significant scene from the first episode, titled "A Crack" (#1x01: La grieta, Manolo Caro, Netflix: 2022), when Gloria (Nimri) is chatting with other mothers in the park and they bring up the question of celebrating her baby's first birthday, in a momentary lapse of her "good mother" role she dismisses the idea: "He won't even notice." Quickly, she smiles in an effort to conceal

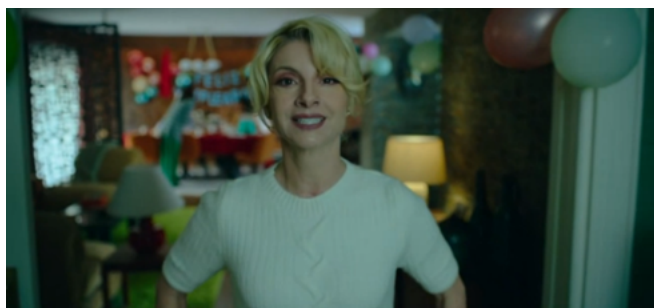


Image 1. The forced smile of the “good mother” in the series *Holy Family*

her blunder. Later, when she ends up preparing her son’s party, the false smile will be performed repeatedly throughout the scene (Image 1).

The forced smile acts as an element of ironic reflexivity, exposing her false nature to the spectator. As Schoentjes (2001: 200) argues, “irony involves pretending to take seriously what one does not value; it penetrates the spirit of the other person’s game to show that its rules are stupid or perverse.” Indeed, Nimri *plays* with the smile of institutional motherhood to critique its artificiality and to reveal the absurdity of a patriarchal tradition that has normalised the idea that mothers must always appear to be friendly and cheerful.

AMBIVALENCE AS RESISTANCE

The “good mother” archetype is defined by Palomar Vereá as a sensitive, angelic archetype characterised by “patience, tolerance, the ability to console, the ability to heal, to care, to tend, to listen, to protect, to sacrifice” (2004: 16). Nimri shows that she is perfectly familiar with these qualities of institutional motherhood, but she often performs them in combination with opposing expressions or gestures. For example, in a scene from the *Locked Up* episode titled “Betrayal” (#4x05: Traición, Carles Torrens, Fox Spain: 2019), Zulema criticises herself, saying that she is “a shitty mother” while she nervously takes her friend Saray’s (Alba Flores) baby in her arms and gazes at the child sweetly (Image 2). The scene is ironic because it is ambiguous (Hutcheon, 2005). However, it is interesting to note that this ambivalence is not as polarised as it might seem; as pointed out above, Nimri often performs a motherly smile as a consciously ironic and artificial gesture. The tenderness of her facial expression in this scene could therefore be suspected of being false or feigned. But even more significant is the fact that Zulema

Image 2. Zulema looks tenderly at the baby after confessing that she is “a shitty mother” in the series *Locked Up*



identifies herself as “a shitty mother” right before offering the spectator a maternal image: through contradiction—a recurring feature of the many definitions of the term “irony” (Schoentjes, 2001: 98-99)—Nimri plays with oppositions to resist a traditional simplistic dualism, conveying a transparently ironic attitude towards the supposedly monosemous definition of motherhood.

Similarly, in the previous episode, titled “Mum” (#4x04: Mamá, Ramón Salazar, Fox Spain: 2019), in a scene where she needs to convey the impression that she doesn’t care about her daughter, Fátima (Georgina Amorós), Zulema also conveys her ambivalence, partially covering her face with her hand to hide the tears that betray her maternal sacrifice as she speaks severely to her daughter: “I don’t want you to smile at me. I don’t even want to smell you.” The contrast between the harshness of her words and the tears welling in her eyes reflects Nimri’s ability to combine the bad mother with the sacrificial mother. Immediately after this, she adds an ironic touch to the scene by demanding abruptly and derisively: “Now get your ass off that chair.” In the apparent incongruity between the comedic and the melodramatic, but without undermining her sacrificial gesture, Nimri uses irony to give the situation “a meaning of its own”. Bruzos Moro (2009: 49) defines irony as a “polyphonic enunciation” that makes it possible for opposing meanings to engage in a dialogue, generating a “non-habitual” discourse that in the case of Nimri’s characters resists the representation of a monosemous image of motherhood.

In a similarly ambivalent way, Alicia Sierra, Nimri’s character in *Money Heist*, uses the tenderness associated with motherhood to extract information from Rio, the young gang member she has captured (#3x02: Aikido, Jesús Colmenar, Netflix: 2019). While protecting her pregnant belly with one hand, Alicia encourages her prisoner—who has clearly been tortured—to put his ear to her stomach to listen to the baby kicking. She allows the young man to forget about his pain for



Image 3. Alicia uses her womb to get her prisoner to talk in the series *Money Heist*

a moment: Rio smiles and caresses the belly gently, moved by the intimate warmth of the situation (Image 3). Then Alicia immediately resumes the interrogation, and when Rio refuses to speak she forces him to inhale gas to put him to sleep while she remarks softly in an ironic tone: “Come on, another little horsey ride.” Nimri’s performative restraint allows her to shift from tenderness to violence without changing the register of her voice, which is always serene and motherly, combining warmth with terror. In this way, her voice is deliberately “ostentatious” (Naremore, 1990) in its subtle mockery of her own method of torture. Nimri’s ironic tone makes it seem as if her mocking voice acknowledged the figurative “excess” of the image. A mother’s womb as a weapon of torture is certainly an image that creates a new meaning. In this sense, it is an image of resistance; as Soto Calderón suggests, drawing on Michel Foucault (2007), “resistance is neither reactive nor negative; it is a process of creation and permanent transformation [...]. Resistance is inventive” (2023: 65). Consequently, in the transformation of

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the womb into an instrument of torture, the beneficent meaning of the pregnant belly is *altered*, offering a new image of motherhood.

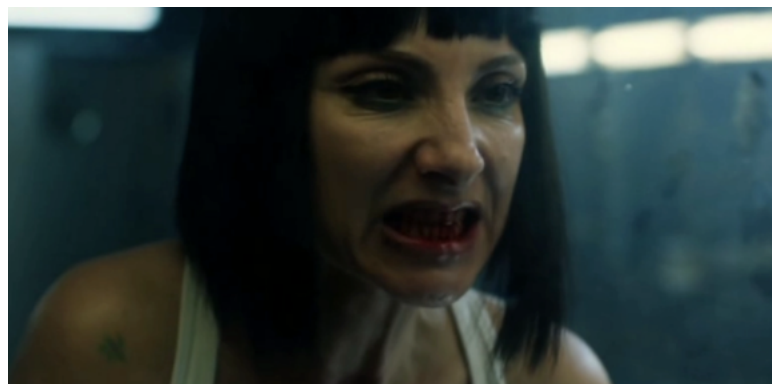
THE VIOLENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD

In his study on the mother archetype, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1994) identified the dual nature of this universal pattern involving the coexistence of a good mother and a terrible mother. According to Jung (1994: 76), the terrible mother has been portrayed as a destructive, threatening and extremely violent figure capable of transgressing boundaries and even unleashing chaos on organised society. In response to this aggressive female power, institutional motherhood has channelled this violence, reinforcing the mother's protective instinct towards her children and lionising women's fury when they react aggressively to defend their young. As Elizabeth Badinter (1981) points out, the maternal instinct is not necessarily present in all mothers but is influenced by a social and historical construction. In this way, by limiting this maternal force, mothers' bodies are "controlled" (Rich, 1986) to prevent them from challenging the patriarchal system.

In cinema, the overprotective mother who resorts to violence to protect her children is a common motif in both the melodrama and horror genres (Arnold, 2013). In these contexts, maternal aggression often arises as a consequence of the dictates of institutional motherhood, usually governed by patriarchal authorities. In the characters portrayed by Najwa Nimri, the patriarchy is embodied in various male characters; for example, in Sandoval (Ramiro Blas), the prison manager in *Locked Up*; in the private investigator in *Holy Family*; and in Colonel Tamayo in *Money Heist*. In all three cases, these characters try to subdue the power of the female protagonists by restricting them to their maternal responsibilities.

In the *Locked Up* episode titled "Mum" (#4x04: Mamá, Ramón Salazar, Fox Spain: 2019), Sandoval attempts to weaken Zulema's female strength by abusing Fátima, her daughter, who is an inmate at the same prison. In this scene, another prisoner, Goya (Itziar Castro), attacks Fátima in the communal bathroom in her mother's presence, on Sandoval's instigation. This sequence is of special significance because Zulema shows that she is aware of the patriarchal strategy and that she therefore needs to resist the supposed maternal instinct that Sandoval is trying to exploit, while at the same time she reveals that she possesses the desire for protection fostered by the patriarchy. The scene begins with Zulema brushing her teeth in front of a large mirror. Fátima then enters the scene and is immediately insulted and humiliated by Goya. Zulema watches the scene quietly in the mirror while she continues to brush her teeth. When Goya forces Fátima to masturbate her, Zulema's face betrays a flash of maternal anguish, which she quickly conceals to feign indifference to her daughter's harassment. Zulema's contained anger reaffirms the presence of her maternal instinct while at the same time revealing the violence inherent in it. She brushes her teeth more fiercely, her facial expression hardening, until she spits out the blood she has drawn from her gums. Her face reflected in the mirror, with her blood-stained teeth, evokes the image of a devouring animal (Image 4).

Image 4. Zulema evoking an animalised figure in the series *Locked Up*



It is clear that Zulema's fury is the product of Sandoval's strategy, which has succeeded in redirecting her subversive violence towards a protective family instinct. This makes the presence of the maternal instinct in Zulema's nature indisputably clear. However, in her aggressive attack on her gums and the conversion of her face into an animalised figure, Nimri offers an ironic picture of the inherent violence of the maternal instinct. Through the exaggeration of her facial expression, Zulema parodies the violent instinct of traditional motherhood while resisting institutional motherhood.

RESISTANCE AS A PROCESS OF SUBJECTIVATION

One of the most meaningful scenes of motherhood is indisputably the moment of childbirth, an experience that institutional motherhood has medicalised (Rich, 1986; Vivas, 2019; Crespi and Asensio, 2022) with no consideration of the spontaneous, reflexive, emotional expressions of women in labour. In this respect, the *Money Heist* episode titled "The Spectacle of Life" (#5x03: El espectáculo de la vida, Kolda Serra, Netflix: 2021), in which Alicia Sierra (Nimri) gives birth to her daughter, is a scene worthy of analysis here. Moments before her waters break, Alicia is still actively organising her offensive strategy against her superiors and part of the criminal gang holed up in the Bank of Spain. Nimri's character makes it clear that her pregnancy is not affecting her professional life and she rejects the idea of vulnerability often associated with the condition. In this way, she enacts an attitude that might initially be identified as indicative of an autonomous neoliberal subject (McGee, 2005). Instead, her excited, extremely expressive behaviour (which will reach its peak at the moment she begins the delivery stage) is the preamble to a conscious childbirth that she will end up sharing with the characters around her.

ALICIA CHALLENGES THE INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD THAT HAS CONTROLLED WOMEN'S BODIES FOR CENTURIES, MEDICALISING AND MASCULINISING CHILDBIRTH WHILE NEGATING THE DISCOURSES OF WOMEN IN LABOUR

Alicia has managed to capture the leader of the criminal gang, the Professor (Sergio Marquina), along with two other gang members, all of whom she has tied up in an abandoned warehouse. In her character's state of permanent excitement, Nimri emphasises her ironic, mocking tone as she talks to the Professor: "Your fans are going to worship him [Colonel Tamayo]; your girlfriend, the trashy Power Ranger, the teddy bear from the Balkans, the kid from the grave [...], the people you're willing to die for [...] are dead." Although sarcastic, the tone of her voice is soft and serene, like the tone she used while torturing Rio. At this moment, Alicia highlights the mocking yet sombre quality that Jankelevitch (1982: 115) attributes to irony, which has the ability to "freeze" laughter. The Professor, perplexed by Alicia's hyperactivity, warns her that she could go into labour at any moment, but she is fixated on celebrating her strategy, while belittling the Professor's gang and their doomed plan. Moments later, her waters break. At that moment, her male nemesis assures her that if she unties him he will help deliver her baby. But Alicia holds firm, confirming her decision to give birth alone: "On my own, like my grandmother did, and like hundreds of women throughout history have done." Through the female genealogy she evokes, Alicia challenges the institutional motherhood that has controlled women's bodies for centuries, medicalising and masculinising childbirth while negating the discourses of women in labour.

Alicia then falls back on a mattress while proclaiming sarcastically: "Welcome to the spectacle of life!" She thus announces a raw, carnal process

quite unrelated to the false romantic imaginary of childbirth. She makes an improvised selfie stick to hold her mobile phone so that she can monitor her own labour. As her pain becomes unbearable, the Professor tells her that she cannot take any drugs for it because it would put the baby at risk. Alicia groans, drawing out the syllables of each word as she exclaims “Are you fucking kidding me?!” in an ironic tone that transforms her groaning into a comic protest. Shortly after this, again in her invariably mocking tone, she heaps scorn on the institutional methods of childbirth and, with her voice straining under the pain of her contractions, she shouts at the Professor: “This kid adores risk, you son of a bitch!”

The birth is depicted using a cross-cutting technique that alternates between images of Alicia enduring her contractions, screaming and sweating, and violent scenes of the army storming the Bank of Spain to apprehend the remaining members of the Professor’s gang. The clear association of her labour with the attack strategy of the military institution is reinforced when Alicia ironically announces her childbirth as “the birth plan”. However, she later unexpectedly agrees to untie her prisoners to help her with the labour. The three men dutifully accept the role of midwives and at last, when the Professor lifts up the newborn baby in his hands, his excited face is as celebratory as the new mother’s. This climactic scene thus constitutes a collective act of resistance against institutional childbirth. Ana Corbalán (2023) suggests



Image 5. The coexistence of opposing bodies in the labour in *Money Heist*

that by giving into the Professor’s offers of help, Alicia submits to the patriarchy. However, we would argue that this sequence does not relegate Alicia to the background, as she takes possession of the centre of the scene at this moment: in the collective participation in the labour, everyone is depicted as contributing to her unconventional logic of resistance. Andrea Soto Calderón (2023: 59) argues that resistance can be understood as a form of *contagion* between bodies which, even without recognising one another, configure a new world of meaning, opening up *the possibility of altering* the dominant discourses. In this unusual sequence, Alicia thus presents a “process of subjectivation” (Rancière, 2006: 21) that reveals that the protagonist needs the *Other* in order to render the power of her subjectivity visible. Together in the same shot (Image 5), united as enemies, they “denaturalise” their association with power, establishing a new affective configuration between them that strengthens their continued opposition to the institutional authority. It is no coincidence that this sequence is set in a transitory location: an abandoned warehouse where the Professor has set up his hideout. In this non-social space, Alicia finds herself in an ambiguous, liminal situation: she becomes the mother of a child—with the significantly triumphant name of Victoria—in the company of her adversaries, foreshadowing not only that her experience of motherhood will

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not be an institutional experience, but also that she will give up her role as a police officer, distancing herself from the corrupt patriarchal power to which she once belonged.

CONCLUSIONS

Nimri has previously stated that television series were all she watched for years and that she believes that acting “right now is on television” (García, 2015); she has also explained that in fiction series “you have a lot of time to try things; you learn a lot” (Pérez, 2024). In several statements, she has shown her awareness that her TV series characters make use of a groundbreaking form of humour (Céspedes, 2018; Aldaz, 2020; Reyes, 2022). It is clear that Nimri has been able to construct characters who share an ironic, mocking and often challenging tone. Netflix Spain’s TikTok account posted a video titled *De la cárcel se sale, que se lo pregunten a Zulema* (Netflix España, 2024), which takes advantage of Nimri’s disruptive way of talking and acting to suggest that her character in her latest series, *Breathless* (Respira, Carlos Montero, Netflix: 2024), in which she plays the president of the Valencian regional government, is not so different from the characters she portrays in the three series analysed in this article. The montage creates a narrative that exploits her characteristic irony, creating the impression that all the characters played by Nimri are variations on the same character at different times in her life. Similarly, the images of resistance to institutional motherhood analysed in this article are all interconnected, as they arise out of the same subjectivity that is aimed at transforming traditional representations of motherhood. Through expressive strategies such as the forced smile feigning a supposed maternal happiness, the pregnant womb turned into an instrument of torture, the masquerade of a face that parodies the violence inherent in the maternal instinct, and the experience of childbirth reinterpreted as an act of

non-normative celebration, Nimri portrays transgressive mothers who challenge the traditional roles associated with institutional motherhood, offering new images of the mother figure. ■

NOTES

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- 1 Despite her success, there is hardly any research published on Najwa Nimri, except for a chapter on her work with the filmmaker Daniel Calparsoro at the beginning of her career (Davies, 2009).
- 2 Even in the incident where she struck a reporter’s camera when he repeatedly tried to get her to answer his questions (“Najwa Nimri pierde”, 2021), Nimri’s violent reaction is inevitably associated with her fictional characters.
- 3 When asked whether she was like a sergeant as a mother to her son, Nimri replied: “More than a sergeant; it works for him and he likes it” (Diéguez, 2016). Similarly, she declares that her son likes her TV series—but not her films—and tells her that she is “la puta ama” (“the fucking boss”) (Diéguez, 2019).
- 4 The English translations of all quotes originally in Spanish are the authors’.

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RESISTANCES TO INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD: NAJWA NIMRI IN SPANISH SERIAL FICTION

Abstract

The main objective of this study is to analyse some of the images of resistance to institutional motherhood offered by Najwa Nimri in her portrayals of violent, criminal mothers in three Spanish television series: *Locked Up*, *Money Heist* and *Holy Family*. Although she manages to “break away” performatively from the traditional mother archetype, Nimri nonetheless exhibits qualities of the “good mother”, transfiguring some of her values and revealing the inherently violent nature of institutional motherhood. Drawing on star studies, philosophical perspectives on the notion of resistance from Michel Foucault to Andrea Soto Calderón, and the feminist discourses of Adrienne Rich and Hélène Cixous, this study focuses on moments where Nimri positions herself in the liminal spaces between the good mother and the bad mother, between tradition and the depiction of a non-normative motherhood. It is in these spaces of resistance that she amplifies one of her “performance signs”: an ironic nuance that she introduces into her characters through her body or her speech. This performative projection underlines the attitude of resistance in Nimri’s characters, revealing the possibility of a female subjectivity capable of projecting “new” images of motherhood.

Key words

Najwa Nimri; Actresses; Institutional motherhood; Images of resistance; Non-normative gestures; Irony; Star studies.

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RESISTENCIAS A LA MATERNIDAD INSTITUCIONAL: NAJWA NIMRI EN LA FICCIÓN SERIAL ESPAÑOLA

Resumen

El objetivo principal de este estudio es analizar algunas de las imágenes de resistencia a la maternidad institucional que los personajes criminales de Najwa Nimri generan en los papeles de madres violentas de las series españolas *Vis a Vis*, *La casa de papel* y *Sagrada familia*. Aunque Nimri consigue «romper» con el arquetipo de la madre tradicional, parte, sin embargo, de los atributos de la «buena madre», transmutando algunos de sus valores y revelando el carácter violento de la maternidad institucional. Desde los *star studies*, las aportaciones filosóficas sobre la noción de resistencia —de Michel Foucault a Andrea Soto Calderón— y los discursos feministas de Adrienne Rich o Hélène Cixous, estudiaremos los momentos en los que Nimri se sitúa en los espacios liminares entre la buena y la mala madre, entre la tradición y la proyección de una maternidad no normativa. Es en estos espacios de resistencia donde la actriz exagera uno de «sus signos de actuación»: el matiz irónico que corporal y/o oralmente inserta en sus ficciones audiovisuales. Esta impostación interpretativa subraya la actitud de resistencia de sus personajes, revelando la posibilidad de una subjetividad femenina capaz de proyectar «nuevas» imágenes de maternidad.

Palabras clave

Najwa Nimri; Actrices; Maternidad institucional; Imágenes de resistencia; Gestualidad no normativa; Ironía; Star studies.

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