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Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and the Representation of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence[40]

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Abstract:

Carmen Maria Machado's autobiographical memoir *In the Dream House* (2019) addresses, in the form of an inventive narrative, domestic abuse in lesbian relationships. In this collection of small chapters, the author describes a total of 141 of her own experiences as a victim of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence as, for her, "the Dream House was never just the Dream House."[42] This paper will examine how Machado challenges stereotypes, sheds light on the complexity of abuse dynamics, and contributes significantly to the discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, debunking the myths around the idea that lesbian relationships are idyllic.

Keywords: Carmen Maria Machado, gender violence, lesbian memoir, Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence.

1. Introduction

In the realm of literature, the representation of domestic violence has served as a vital lens through which to analyse and comprehend the complexity of abusive relationships and their dynamics. Within the topic of domestic violence, Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence, or SSIPV, is still taboo, something that exists, yet a minority of people have ever discussed it. According to Farrugia and Abela, "even today, since SSIPV is not

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[42] Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*. (New York City: Graywolf Press, 2019), 76.

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particularly visible and spoken about, society does not give it its due importance and it remains a topic which still needs to be explored further."[43]

Carmen Maria Machado's groundbreaking memoir *In The Dream House*, published in 2019, arises as a noteworthy example and contribution to this discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the context of SSIPV. The second-person narrator addresses her experiences evoking her past self using "you." Machado's choice of presenting her account in the form of vignettes, each with the title "*Dream House as* _____" gives the reader a guide on how to read the memoir. It is possible to see how these titles provide a spoiler of how Machado's unnamed partner behaves towards her, clues about how the future is going to be, or how the author creates word plays. An example of the omens foreshadowed by the titles can be found in the chapter called "*Dream House as* Haunted Mansion," which is an antithesis that perfectly symbolises how the initially idyllic relationship has turned into a nightmare, or the chapter called "*Dream House as* Choose Your Own Adventure" is a narrative game in which the reader has to decide what actions Machado is going to take in terms of her relationship, each action having a consequence, and the goal of the game is to maintain the protagonist as alive and sane as possible to continue with the story.

The thesis of this paper tries to demonstrate that the representation of same-sex intimate partner violence in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* debunks the myths around lesbian relationships, mainly the myth that gender violence does not exist in said relationships. In order to do so, this paper will explore the different types of violence presented in the memoir, such as physical, sexual, and psychological violence, to demonstrate that Machado's memoir challenges stereotypes, sheds light on the complexity of abuse dynamics, and contributes significantly to the discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, debunking the myths around the idea that lesbian relationships are idyllic.

Before dealing with how domestic violence is treated in Machado's memoir, it is important to state some facts about domestic violence, also called intimate partner

[43] Kristy Farrugia and Beverly Abela. "The Broken Rainbow: Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence." *MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2019): 2

violence, as authors such as Murray Straus[44] or Richard Gelles[45] have defined it. According to the United Nations, domestic abuse "can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner."[46] Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence, hence, is the pattern of behaviour exerted in same-sex relationships. Nonetheless, even if society is aware of the existence of this problem, it has not been studied by scholars in both literature and as a general topic until some decades ago.

Throughout much of history, discussions of domestic violence in same-sex relationships were dominated by heteronormative perspectives, assuming a male-female dynamic, as it was thought that men had the right to act violently against women.[47] Same-sex relationships were often marginalised or condemned, leading to a lack of acknowledgement of violence within these partnerships. In many societies, same-sex relationships were deemed taboo or even criminalised, further silencing victims and hindering any efforts to address the issue.

Moreover, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973, as it was included in the DSM 1 of 1952 under the category of Sociopathic Personality Disturbance, specifically arguing homosexuals had a "sexual deviation" and comparing them to rapists, paedophiles, and other sexual criminals, which reinforced negative stereotypes and contributed to the marginalisation of LGTBQ+ individuals. However, it was not until the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that the LGTBQ+ rights movement in the United States had an excruciating turning point as it motivated LGTB political activism and led to the creation of numerous gay rights organisations such as GLAAD, a non-profit organisation focused on LGTBQ advocacy, or the Gay Liberation Front. It was because of these demonstrations that conversations about same-sex relationships emerged in the public sphere, although it did not translate into awareness by same-sex couples who were experiencing IPV.

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[44] Murray A. Straus and Martha Smithey, "Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence." *Crime prevention: New approaches* (2004): 239-276.
[45] Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate violence and abuse in families.* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016).
[46] United Nations, "What is Domestic Abuse?"
[47] Zhen Wu, "A Review of Gender Stereotypes in Domestic Violence." *Journal of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences* 8, (2023): 1306.

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Even in the twenty-first century, and despite the LGTBQ+ community gaining social prominence and rights, violence in lesbian relationships has been argued to be a myth that society fails to acknowledge. Condit states that "for domestic violence in lesbian partnerships to be recognised as a serious social problem, society first needs to recognise that lesbian partnerships do indeed exist."[48] Lesbian relationships are seen as idyllic, a paradise for women because women, according to the traditional gender roles, are submissive and compliant, as Janice Ristock argues that "many lesbian feminist theorists in the mid to late 70s stressed the ideal that lesbian relationships were voluntary, consensual, based on affection and compatibility rather than on the same social factors that bind heterosexual relationships."[49] This line of thought and Condit's statement leads to a simple question: if women are indeed passive and submissive creatures, why would they be violent against other women?

Although there are few studies on SSIPV, they all coincide in one worrying fact: it occurs at the same degree or even higher than heterosexual IPV; in fact, a study conducted by Adam Messinger in 2011 revealed that lesbian women in the United States were at higher risk of being involved in Intimate Partner Violence.[50] In another study conducted by Breiding et al., half the lesbian women who participated in the survey were or had been victims of physical or psychological abuse in their relationships. Furthermore, almost three out of four affirmed to be victims of psychological Intimate Partner Violence.[51] The problem not only lies in the rate of SSIPV but also in the fact that this violence is not reported. Admitting the existence of SSIPV in lesbian relationships would mean admitting a reality that society does not want to admit: lesbians are not in peaceful and utopic relationships and violence among them exists, even if it is not associated with the typical violent maleness seen in heterosexual IPV.

[48] Cassidy Condit, "Domestic Violence in Lesbian Partnerships: Dispelling the Myths." *Writing for a Real World*, University of San Francisco Program in Rhetoric and Composition, (2005): 17
[49] Janice L. Ristock, "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships." *Canadian Woman Studies* 12, no. 1, (1991): 74
[50] Adam Messinger, "Invisible Victims: Same-Sex IPV in the National Violence Against Women Survey." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26, no. 11, (2010): 2230
[51] Brieding et al., qtd in Luca Rollè et al. "When Intimate Partner Violence Meets Same-Sex Couples: A Review of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1506. (2018): 2

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1.1. Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence

Jude Irwin argues that, due to the dominant heteronormative discourses, violence in lesbian relationships has been reduced to the background.[52] This exclusion of queer women's experiences has two different yet similar results: "to create and maintain the invisibility of violence in lesbian relationships" and "to acknowledge or interrogate violence in lesbian relationships, further reinforcing its invisibility."[53] Additionally, the inability to speak about this topic with such freedom or because of the reluctance of some lesbians inside the lesbian community to understand and acknowledge the fact that women can be violent as well has fuelled the silence and the reduction of testimonies of lesbians who were abused by their female partners. Janice Ristock contributes to this statement by asserting that "the silence is also due to the fear that open discussion will generate even more negative images about the lesbian community than the stereotypes and prejudices that society already holds."[54] Apart from the ones which have already been mentioned, these stereotypes refer to the two types of lesbian appearance: the butch, that is, the "masculine" lesbian, and the femme, also known as the "feminine" lesbian, that society has imposed on them or the fetishism lesbians have to suffer in their daily lives, among others.

Not only are these stereotypes of lesbian women and LGTB people seen in society but also in the media and literature. If one were to think about most watched series or films, or classics in which the protagonists are LGTB individuals, examples are scarce. It is true that, nowadays, authors and directors are committed to bringing representations of gay, transsexual, or bisexual people to their works, whether on the big screen, the small screen, or the pages of a book, as is present in Alice Oseman's graphic novel and Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2019), in the novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller, or the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The common trope in these examples is, at some point, the tragic history, as if the fate of LGTB people in their relationships was to be doomed to fail, as Heather Love in her book *Feeling*

[52] Jude Irwin, "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians." *Qualitative Social Work* 7, no. 2, (2008): 206
[53] Irwin, "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians," 206.
[54] Janice Ristock, "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships," 74.

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Backward has explored by stating that "those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead."[55]

However, and even though literature has been significant in giving voice to the marginalised in the past, lesbians and lesbianism in general are underrepresented in today's culture, as Lidia Steiner claims, "most television portrayals focused on gay males; lesbians were scarcely visible."[56] It is argued that this lack of "women loving women" literature hinders lesbians from finding lookalikes or similar situations to their own in order to feel understood or, at some point, accepted in society. Although there are different accounts of women falling in love or being victims of different types of abuse, it has been written and told through a heterosexist perspective. Moreover, Bonnie Zimmerman states that "lesbians have also expressed concern that the absence of lesbian material in women's studies journals such as *Feminist Studies, Women's Studies,* and *Women and Literature* indicates heterosexism either by omission or by design."[57] Throughout history, lesbian interpretations of pieces of literature or even lesbian plots have been avoided by many writers, especially female writers, therefore, there has been and there is a tendency to mask all relationships between women as "aspects of the self" even if there could be layers of "bonding or love between women."[58]

The social erasure of lesbian literature has reached even the feminist canon, being perceived as "a minor and somewhat discomforting variation within the female life cycle,"[59] but this erasure does not deny its existence. Lesbian writing are as important as heterosexual literature, as they are capable of portraying experiences about sexuality or the female body from a woman's perspective, not experiences about women as seen by the male gaze. Moreover, what lesbian writings include is the queer perspective: the social and, sometimes, familiar stigma, the shame, or the sufferings that queer people have felt all their lives. Gurko and Gearhart also argue that lesbian

[55] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History.* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007): 1.
[56] Lidia Steiner, "Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbian, gays and the media." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 4, (1993): 401.
[57] Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3, (1981): 453.
[58] Zimmerman, 454.
[59] Zimmerman, 469.

literature "does express a revolutionary model of sexuality which in its structure, its content, and its practice defies the fundamental violent assumptions of patriarchal culture."[60] This is what Carmen Maria Machado intends to do with her memoir *In The Dream House*. By providing an account of her experiences, memories, and traumas with her abusive partner in the so-called Dream House, Machado puts into words the stigma of dating another woman in a society where lesbianism was still highly disregarded and the suffering of being physically, psychologically, and even sexually abused by this other woman.

2. The Representation of SSIPV in *In the Dream House*

As it has already been mentioned, Machado's memoir debunks several myths which have been true about lesbian relationships through the narration of her own experience in an abusive relationship with a woman. The main myth that *In the Dream House* succeeds in debunking about SSIPV is that, due to the societal representation of femininity, women are not violent as it "precludes the possibility that one woman could inflict violence upon another."[61] Lesbian relationships have been presented as egalitarian, "free from the power struggles that exist in heterosexual relationships."[62] Nonetheless, as it is shown in Machado's memoir, is that violence is used so as to determine who is in power in the relationship, this is, the unnamed woman, and who is the subordinate of it: Carmen.

The other myth that is to be debunked is the idea that same-sex intimate partner violence, in this case, woman-to-woman violence is inexistent because of gender roles, as there is no man in the equation can exert such violence on another woman. This idea has been created based on the heteronormative discourses that lead our society. As Mary Eaton argues, "women batter women because they have internalised the interconnected norms of heterosexism/homophobia and misogyny which lie at the core

[60] Jean Gurko and Sally Gearheart, qtd in Zimmerman, 465–466.
[61] Condit, "Domestic Violence in Lesbian Partnerships: Dispelling the Myths," 56.
[62] Sinéad Spelman, "Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In The Dream House*: Exploring Same-Sex Female Intimate Partner Abuse Through Literary Tropes." *Dearcadh: Graduate Journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights* 3, (2022): 46.

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of sex role system."[63] Ristock also agrees with the idea that woman-to-woman violence is an example of internalised misogyny as women are, like the rest of the world, "well aware of the examples of woman-hating that exist in our culture."[64] Therefore, this analysis will delve into the three different types of violence that the main character has to deal with in said relationship to how the myth of the inexistence of violence in lesbian relationships is far from reality.

2.1. Sexual Violence in *In the Dream House*

To begin with, the depiction of sexual violence in *In the Dream House* is quite minimal and goes almost unnoticed in comparison to that of physical and psychological violence. Still, it is important to mention it as it disrupts the assumption that abuse in lesbian relationships is solely confined to emotional or physical forms.

Throughout Carmen Maria Machado's relationship with her abuser, the unnamed woman exercises various forms of sexual violence on Machado. It is significant to point out that this woman is Carmen's first girlfriend and that she is still learning how to act in a lesbian relationship and how lesbian relationships are, as she refers to the unnamed woman as "the first woman who yokes herself to you with the label *girlfriend*" and states that she is "learning that lesbian relationships are, somehow, different."[65] Therefore, the only guide through this new path of her life is her abuser, who will take advantage of Carmen's naiveness in this aspect. At the very beginning of their relationship, Machado is overwhelmed by the chemistry they both have in terms of sex: "You don't know what is more of a miracle: her body, or her love of your body. She haunts your erotic imagination. You are both perpetually wet. You fuck, it seems, everywhere."[66] Although having sexual encounters with a man prior to this same-sex relationship, Carmen has never felt as loved as she feels with the woman in the Dream House, which leads to the development of, somehow, blind trust in her. However, the woman has shown signals of keeping their relationship purely sexual, with no feelings

[63] Mary Eaton, qtd. in Irwin, "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians," 201.
[64] Ristock, "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships," 75.
[65] Machado, 47.
[66] Machado, 43.

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involved, as Machado quotes in "*Dream House* as Famous Last Words" when her ex-girlfriend clearly states that they "can fuck, but [they] can't fall in love."[67]

Nonetheless, as the relationship progresses and time passes, that blind trust that Carmen has in the unnamed woman turns into fear, as will be seen in the section "Psychological violence in *In the Dream House*," putting Machado in a state of autopilot as far as pleasure is concerned. Sex becomes satisfying for the woman from the Dream House, while for Carmen, it is a mere formality, something that has to happen to keep her abuser happy because she does not know what to do, "only speaking the language of giving [herself] up."[68] It is also possible to say that Carmen is a victim of rape in some instances, as she has to have sexual relationships with her girlfriend even though she does not want to, or she is not mentally or emotionally present. She lets her do as she pleases with her body, having "voided [her] body so many times by now that it is the force of habit."[69]

At one point, the woman accuses Carmen of having slept with several people or wanting to do so: "Over the course of your relationship, she will accuse you of fucking, or wanting to fuck, or planning to fuck, the following people: your roommate, your roommate's girlfriend, dozens of your friends."[70] This accusation becomes an obsession to the point where Carmen has to stop talking to her classmates because her abuser thinks that she is cheating on her with them, throwing it in her face when they have sex one night after the woman from the Dream House has consumed alcohol—something that is common in her daily routine: "'Who are you thinking about,' she says. It is phrased like a question but isn't. Your mouth moves, but nothing comes out, and she squeezes your jaw a little harder. 'Look at me when I fuck you,' she says. You pretend to come."[71]

However, Machado does not always comply with the woman's requests. In "*Dream House* as House in Iowa," the woman and Carmen have an argument over Halloween costumes, and, at night, her abuser wants to have sexual intercourse with

[67] Machado, 22.
[68] Machado, 209.
[69] Machado, 183.
[70] Machado, 85.
[71] Machado, 86.

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her, but Carmen refuses to and "turn[s] into [her] pillow"[72] after having to endure her screams and accusations of ruining the night throughout the house. This "act of rebellion" shows that Carmen has not completely lost herself in the reality of her relationship. Despite living most of the time under the yoke of her abuser, the autopilot state in which she finds herself is not always activated, allowing her to continue being herself without becoming depersonalised.

2.2. Physical Violence in *In the Dream House*

Carmen Maria Machado, during her relationship with her ex-girlfriend, is also subjected to instances of physical violence, although these only occur during two arguments that the couple have once the relationship is advanced. This fact means that the trust that Machado has in the woman from the Dream House continues to decrease and the fear of continuous reprisals and repeated violent actions increases.

The first example of physical violence in the memoir happens when Carmen and the woman are visiting the latter's parents in Florida. In the parents' house, the woman grips Carmen's arm tightly, "touching [her] in a way that is not filled with love."[73] It is then that Carmen realises something is not normal with the woman's behaviour and reactions and starts to act automatically, following her and responding to her petitions because she does not know what to do. After that, when they are alone on the beach, Carmen lets her girlfriend know how she felt at that moment, asking for an explanation for such a violent reaction, to which the woman simply replies that she loves Carmen after apologising.[74] In this sense, along with the sense of sexual and psychological violence, Carmen has been betrayed by the woman who was supposed to be her major ally in the queer community, a new and unexplored territory for her.

The second instance of physical violence that is to be found in the memoir happens after a meeting with the woman and her friends, where the woman tries to touch Carmen sexually in front of the other people in the bowling alley, but Carmen tells

[72] Machado, 90.
[73] Machado, 62.
[74] Machado, 63.

her to stop. This response makes her abuser angry and starts telling Machado how much she hates her while they are in public. Later on, in their so-called Dream House, the girlfriend continues to scream at Carmen, taking her suitcase and throwing a pair of shoes towards Machado; also, she misses, either because she "[was] so quick to dodge them or because she couldn't aim for shit."[75] Nonetheless, after acting violently, the woman from the Dream House stays in the living room, sitting on the couch and asking Carmen why she looks upset once she sees Carmen trembling and crying. Acting as if nothing has happened, with such indifference, is something quite common in abusers: in 2014, nearly three-quarters (73.8%) of adult women experiencing domestic violence experienced gaslighting.[76] This device could be analysed through the point of view of psychology and stating that she is simply manipulating Carmen, as will be discussed in the next section.

2.3. Psychological and Emotional Violence in *In the Dream House*

Lastly, the most common and the worst instances of violence portrayed in Machado's memoir are the psychological violence. In a study conducted by Claire M. Renzetti in 1989, it was shown that psychological abuse was the most frequent type of violence in SSIPV, as it was used "as the weapon to assure and maintain power and control."[77] Therefore, Renzetti posed that the percentage of psychological abuse in same-sex relationships is 70%, impacting an estimated three million of lesbian women in the United States.[78] In this part, not only the analysis will focus on the attempts of emotional manipulation and gaslight that the woman from the Dream House has towards Carmen, but also on the Dream House as the third protagonist of the memoir since it acts as an accomplice of the violence exerted against Machado.

As in the previous examples, the unnamed woman's manipulation progresses throughout their relationship. What at first was an idyllic love between them, rapidly

[75] Machado, 131.
[76] Paige L. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting." *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5, (2019): 854
[77] Claire M. Renzetti, qtd. in Ristock, "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships," 76.
[78] Renzetti, "Building A Second Closet: Third Party Responses to Victims of Lesbian Partner Abuse." *Family Relations* 38, (1989): 79.

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turned out to be a nightmare in which Carmen has to guess how to survive, pleasing and complying with the woman's expectations and threats at every moment. In other words, Carmen's infatuation with her abuser prevents her from recognising the indicators of coercion and manipulation present within their sexual relationship.

The whole relationship seems like a test for Carmen. She should not speak up or she will get punished. She should not act in a certain way, either with other people or in a general context, or she will get punished. She should not say what she truly thinks or she will get punished. She should be perfect, the perfect girl, and the perfect girlfriend. She should be a "sweet girl, sweet self,"[79] showing how loved and loyal she is. She is passing the test, but relationships should not be a test or an exam. Carmen's dread of acting incorrectly leads her to be the woman her girlfriend wants her to be, driven by fear rather than genuine love.

Several times, Carmen is victim of gaslighting, this is, "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem."[80] She thinks what to say and how to respond to her abuser's requests or utterances, but "when she repeats what [she]'ve said back to [her] nothing makes sense."[81] Then, she starts wondering whether she has said the statement or not, doubting not only herself and her speech but also the intention and meaning of her sentence. This experience of gaslighting is added to the autopilot state, as she does not know what is true and what is not in her relationship, her life and, ultimately, herself.

The manipulation takes a step further as the relationship develops. The abuser is aware of how Carmen's mental state is slowly breaking down and takes advantage of it by asking Machado what is wrong with her instead of making a retrospection and realise that the wrong thing in the relationship is herself. She wants to blame Carmen, trying to win every argument, to have the last word in every conversation they have. The woman

[79] Machado, 65.
[80] Merriam-Webster, "gaslight (n.)".
[81] Machado, 90.

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insults her, calling her "fucking cunt" or "fucking slut,"[82] or simply threatening her: "give me the keys or I will kill you."[83] This humiliation is another technique used by abusers to establish dominance over their victims. As Diane Follingstad et al. state, "by making the recipient of the ridicule believe she is not worthwhile, she would remain within the power of the psychological abuser."[84]

Moreover, in the chapter called "*Dream House* as House in Florida," after having acted violently towards Carmen, the woman reinforces her control over the situation and Carmen by emotionally manipulating her through empty promises of love: "'I'm so sorry,' she says. 'I didn't mean it. You know I love you, right?'"[85] The unnamed woman's behaviour is typical of abusers as it functions as a mechanism of manipulation: they hit you because they love you, they hurt you because they care about you. According to Ferraro, "this type of emotional abuse is seen as having long-term debilitating effects on a woman's self-esteem."[86] It is argued that, precisely because of this long-term manipulation and, consequently, these long-term effects, Carmen becomes a punching bag for her abuser whenever the unnamed woman is frustrated or angry. This creates a lack of self-esteem in Carmen, reinforcing the traumatic consequences, even when she is outside the Dream House and living happily with her new partner, Val: "After the Dream House, I developed a sixth sense. It goes off at random times […] A physical revulsion that comes on the heels of nothing at all, something akin to the sour liquid rush of saliva that precedes vomiting."[87]

3. The Gothic in *In the Dream House*

In Gothic narratives, haunted houses are a key element and an important character since they serve as the perfect setting in which evil haunts the protagonist or protagonists of said narratives. Manuel Aguirre's analysis of Gothic fiction emphasises the house as a

[82] Machado, 130.
[83] Machado, 137.
[84] Diane Follingstad et al., "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships." Journal of Family Violence 5, no. 2 (1990): 108.
[85] Machado, 63.
[86] Katherine Ferraro, qtd. in Follingstad et al., "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships," 108.
[87] Machado, 254.

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liminal space that mirrors both the external and the internal conflicts of its characters. In Chapter 3, he outlines how Gothic narratives construct dual ontological zones: the rational, human world, and a numinous, unknowable realm. The house or similar spaces, such as castles and abbeys, often exist at the threshold between these zones.

In *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado uses the house as a Gothic symbol to explore the emotional and psychological effects of her abusive relationship. Much like in Gothic fiction, the Dream House is not a passive setting but a reflective surface that mirrors the dynamics of her relationship. As Machado describes the house "inhaling" and "exhaling,"[88] it becomes a living entity, embodying the shifting power dynamics and her growing sense of dislocation. Moreover, the Dream House reflects her abuser's control, aligning with Aguirre's description of liminal spaces in Gothic fiction as sites where the familiar becomes destabilised and threatening, blurring the line between safety and danger:

> And because you are of a kind, the house knows
> you. When you cry out,
> the lights flicker, ghostly blue and ragged.
> When she says you are shut off,
> the light switches nod their white tiny
> heads. Tiles creak yes beneath her
> edicts—something bad must have happened
> to make you this way, the way
> where you don't want her. But the windows
> rattle, disagree. In their honeyed,
> blindless light, they see it—something bad
> is happening.[89]

Furthermore, the concept of mirroring extends to the Gothic exploration of identity. Aguirre discusses how Gothic spaces often distort or fragment characters' sense of self,

[88] Machado, 79.
[89] Leah Horlick, qtd. in Machado, *In the Dream House*, 124.

reflecting their inner turmoil back at them.[90] Machado captures this Gothic tension in her memoir as the Dream House becomes a space where her autonomy is eroded, and her sense of self is overwritten by her abuser's dominance. In this house, which was supposed to be theirs, Machado's self is erased and disowned to the point that not even her body is owned by her, as it is "her money, her fridge, her rot."[91] The Dream House not only traps Machado physically and emotionally but also serves as a mirror for the imbalance of power and identity within her relationship.

The sense of disowning can be interpreted through the Gothic lenses, as Claire Kahane argues, since "the female Gothic depends as much upon longing and desire as upon fear and hatred. If it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, of a delight in dependence and submission, it also encourages an exploration of the limits of identity."[92] This dependence that Carmen feels towards her abuser as she needs her economically and, most importantly, emotionally. The attempt at depersonalisation at the hands of the woman from the Dream House and the obligation of having to apologise for everything out of fear is an example of the emotional and mental manipulation Carmen must undergo during her relationship.

Alice Lesperance argues in her article that Machado "exposes something that we do not talk about within the queer community"[93] and, therefore, "if the house is queerness, then queer abuse is our monster in the house."[94] Following this idea, it is possible to say that Carmen Maria Machado has created a new language of her own, addressing a safe place as a house must be as a haunted house. Sinéad Spelman agrees with Lesperance in the sense that "In the Dream House itself is a retelling of sorts, dispelling myths surrounding queer intimate partner abuse,"[95] acknowledging the

[90] Manuel Aguirre, "Towards a Definition of the Gothic Genre." In *The Grammar of Gothic*, (Madrid: The Northanger Library Project, 2021), 12.
[91] Machado, 107.
[92] Claire Kahane, "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity." *The Centennial Review* 24, no. 1, (1980): 54.
[93] Alice Lesperance, "Carmen Maria Machado Has Invented a New Genre: The Gothic Memoir." Electric Literature, 2019. https://electricliterature.com/carmen-maria-machado-has-invented-a-new-genre-the-gothic-memoir/.
[94] Lesperance, "Carmen Maria Machado Has Invented a New Genre: The Gothic Memoir."
[95] Spelman, 51.

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several and different stories woman-to-woman abuse victims have not recounted throughout history.

Throughout the memoir, Machado explains how the house is a crucial factor in how the abuse occurs. She describes the Dream House as the opposite of a dream; for her, "The Dream House was never just the Dream House"[96] and, even though it is not an essential requirement for domestic abuse to happen, it helps.[97] Houses are meant to be safe places for us, a place where we can feel at home and peace, and trust each of its corners and each of the people, if any, who live with us. Dating back to ancient civilizations, patriarchal systems delineated gender roles, relegating women to tasks within the household while men engaged in activities outside the home. As a result of this, Linda K. Kerber argues that "when they used the metaphor of separate spheres, historians referred, often interchangeably, to an ideology imposed in women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women."[98]

Through her memoir, Machado subverts the traditional association of women with the domestic sphere through her portrayal of the domestic space itself. Instead of idealising the home as a sanctuary or site of feminine virtue, Machado exposes how it can become a site of confinement and oppression. The Dream House, which initially represents a refuge from the outside world, gradually transforms into a prison where Machado's autonomy is eroded and her sense of self is threatened, as for her, "'safe as houses' is something closer to 'the house always wins.' Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid."[99] By subverting the notion of the home as a haven for women, Machado challenges readers to interrogate the power dynamics inherent within domestic relationships.

[96] Machado, 76.
[97] Machado, 81.
[98] Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1, (1988): 17.
[99] Machado, 83.

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Carmen Maria Machado uses literary genres such as horror and science fiction in her memoir to portray how we experience trauma and how it shapes us. According to Cassidy Crane,

> domestic female horror has a three-part structure: body horror, physical space horror, and relationship horror. These elements are expressed by many female Gothic and horror authors in stories that are shocking not due to vulgarity, but instead for the realism they depict. Female horror is not about creating new fears in the reader; rather, it is about expressing women's greatest fears, which have already been realised.[100]

For Machado, the house is a resemblance to her relationship with her unnamed girlfriend. This relationship, which seemed beautiful and good for her at first, slowly became an element of dehumanisation for both her as a character and as a person. It is because of this that "*In the Dream House*, with its hauntings and descents into trauma, informs us that there is nothing more Gothic than our own memory."[101] At the core of her memory, Machado still remembers every ounce of violence the other woman has inflicted against her and it will always be there, even if, in the present, she is happy with Val—her current wife— and has moved away from the Dream House.

Machado incorporates elements such as foreshadowing into her memoir. For instance, in the chapter called "*Dream House as* Warning," before the girlfriend becomes the woman from the Dream House, Carmen describes how two girls had either disappeared or run away from their houses. She ends the chapter asking herself "What was she walking away from?,"[102] which could be interpreted as a question that foreshadows her future since she would end up running away from the Dream House and her abuser.

Besides, another element of the memoir genre that can be found are descriptions, as Carmen can describe vividly every violent experience she has to suffer;

[100] Cassidy Crane, "Female Domestic Literary Horror through the Lens of the Contemporary Work of Carmen Maria Machado." *Student Scholarship* 117, (2022): 3
[101] Spelman, 48
[102] Machado, 84.

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or flashbacks and reflections, since the narrator is able not only to write about what she had to undergo but also make readers feel a minimal part of what she felt:

> Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don't know what to do. *This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal*. Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response.[103]

Memories, especially traumas, are fragments of our past and present lives which we carry. They act as triggers most of the time, despite having overcome them, putting her body in a state of constant alert, being what Machado experiences as she wonders "if you will ever be able to let someone touch you; if you will ever be able to reconnect your brain and body or if they will forever sit on opposite sides of this new and terrible ravine."[104] She tries to have a normal life after the abuse, going on dates with other people, but her trauma makes her be in a state of constant alert and having her body reacting to the physical contact of one of these boys in a negative way as she goes rigid and lets this man use her like a doll.[105] This failed attempt at sleeping with a man can be seen as Carmen's struggle to reclaim agency over her body and desires in order to overcome the trauma. However, her body's reaction in the example of the impact of the abuse in her body and mind, as she is still in defence mode, unable to fully engage at the moment: "You don't fight, but you don't respond."[106]

In *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado redefines traditional Gothic tropes by using the symbol of the house as a liminal space, echoing the genre's fascination with boundary-breaking and blurred identities. According to the rules developed by Manuel Aguirre, Gothic literature often situates houses or castles as

[103] Machado, 63.
[104] Machado, 220.
[105] Machado, 228.
[106] *Ibid*.

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thresholds between the rational and the numinous realms.[107] Similarly, the Dream House serves as both a refuge and a site of terror, encapsulating Machado's experience of psychological horror during her abusive relationship with a woman. As Kahane suggests, "ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre—and for me this is real Gothic horror—the heroine seems compelled either to resume a more quiescent, socially acceptable role, or to be destroyed."[108]

The Dream House functions as a metaphorical threshold, where Machado's sense of self dissolves under the emotional and psychological manipulation of her abuser, aligning with the Gothic's preoccupation with destabilised identities. The woman from the Dream House not only undermines Machado's sanity but also distorts her perception of herself, illustrating how Gothic mechanisms operate within the memoir. This is portrayed in how, little by little, the woman from the Dream House undermines not only Carmen's sanity but also her perception of herself, as previously seen. However, she can get out of the nightmare that is the Dream House without completely losing herself and being able to recognize that her experience has been an experience of same-sex intimate partner violence. These three types of violence are the reason why victims of violence have trouble when starting new relationships. The lack of trust in other people, added to the intrinsic fear of being either abused or mistreated once again, makes it quite difficult for a victim to feel appreciated, loved, and respected in future relationships.

Hence, the use of Gothic tropes in Machado's memoir serves to underscore both the author's psychological turmoil and the gravity of her experiences. The recount of these experiences through this genre offers a figurative language through which to convey the complex emotional states that the character has undergone. Contrary to a realistic narrative, in which the absence of such elements upholds the portrayal of everyday life and experiences with fidelity, Gothic tropes in memoirs facilitate an exploration of the psyche and subjective experiences.

[107] Aguirre, "Towards a Definition of the Gothic Genre," 3.
[108] Kahane, "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity," 54.

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4. Relation between Formal Aspects of the Memoir and Violence

Another important issue to consider is Machado's use of the second person when referring to herself as a character in her memoir. The first instance of this grammatical choice is seen when Machado claims that "you were not always a You […] I thought you died, but writing this, I'm not sure you did."[109] By employing the technique of addressing herself in the second person, Machado is allowed to explore her experiences with a degree of emotional detachment. She is adopting a stance of self-observation as if she were viewing her own life from an external perspective. This way, Machado can confront her traumatic experience without becoming overwhelmed by its emotional weight. Additionally, the second person narrator can be interpreted as a form of self-address, with Machado speaking directly to her past self as she reflects on her experiences.

Furthermore, Machado establishes an intimate connection between herself and the reader, making them participants of her own experience as if it were their own. This intention of sympathy provides a deeper engagement with the narrative, as it is possible to see in the chapter "*Dream House* as Choose Your Own Adventure," in which Machado allows the reader to play a game and, depending on whether the reader chooses to apologise or to calm the woman form the Dream House down, the outcome is positive: "It's going to be all right. One day, your wife will gently adjust your arm if it touches her face at night, soothingly straightening it while kissing you;"[110] or negative: "That night, she fucks you as you lie there mutely, praying for it to be over, praying she won't notice you're gone."[111] In this chapter, Machado adds comments on the possible decisions made by the reader such as, "You shouldn't be on this page. There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You're smarter than me"[112] or "Are you kidding? You'd never do this."[113] This chapter is quite interesting because Machado offers the reader to enter her dreams, which ends up being both a warning and a reassurance: "You shouldn't be

[109] Machado, 14.
[110] Machado, 185.
[111] Machado, 183.
[112] Machado, 179.
[113] Machado, 178.

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here, but it's okay. It's a dream. She can't find you here. In a minute you're going to wake up and everything is going to seem like it's the same, but it's not. There's a way out. Are you listening to me? You can't forget when you wake up. You can't—."[114] This abrupt ending of the dream can mean either that Carmen has woken up from her dream where she was free, although having to remember the events from the night before, or the woman from the Dream House has found her in her dreams.

However, Machado breaks with the use of the second person at the end of the memoir when she starts writing in first person; this change in the way of writing can be interpreted as she has broken her relationship with her abuser and is now far away from her. Nonetheless, the unnamed woman still lives in her memories as she has yet to overcome the trauma: "And so seven years on I am still terrified that if I force myself awake (as I learned to do as a child), she will step out of the dream and into the waking world where I am safe and so far away."[115]

It is also remarkable the absence of a name for the woman from the Dream House. It is argued that the lack of a name for her is because Machado does not want to personalise her trauma. By doing this, considering the detachment of her experience by the second-person narrator, Machado employs a narrative technique that universalises her story. It allows her to explore the complexities of her relationships without reducing them to a singular, individual experience. Instead, the woman from the Dream House becomes a symbol of collective suffering, which embodies the shared struggles of other survivors of abuse within queer communities.

Furthermore, Machado's choice to withhold the name of her abuser reflects her nuanced exploration of memory and subjectivity. Throughout *In the Dream House*, Machado questions the reliability of memory and how trauma can distort one's perception of reality. By leaving the identity of her abuser open-ended, Machado acknowledges the fluidity of memory and the impossibility of fully capturing the complexity of her experiences within a singular narrative frame. This narrative ambiguity

[114] Machado, 186.
[115] Machado, 234.

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encourages readers to reflect on the inherent limitations of autobiographical storytelling, particularly in the context of trauma and abuse.

Additionally, and connected to the exemplification of psychological violence portrayed in the memoir, Machado's decision to protect the anonymity of her abuser highlights the power dynamics inherent in abusive relationships. In many cases, the abuser maintains control over the victim through manipulation, verbal abuse, possessiveness/jealousy, or public humiliation.[116] Hence, by refusing to publicly name her abuser, Machado asserts agency over her own narrative, subverting the traditional dynamics of victimhood.

By focusing on the nuance of her lived experience rather than the identity of her abuser, Machado resists the cultural demand for a spectacle of accusation that often reduces survivors to mere instruments of public judgment. This choice shifts the locus of power back to her, emphasising her control over the story's framing and purpose:

> I wished everything had this much clarity. I wish I had always lived in this body, and you could have lived here with me, and I could have told you it's all right, it's going to be all right. When I turned around, my dark silver moon-shadow walked in front of me as I made my way back to the shore. My tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it to you. It's the only true kind of ending. Sometimes you have to tell a story, and somewhere, you have to stop.[117]

In doing so, she subverts traditional expectations that equate victimhood with passivity or dependency on external validation, instead reclaiming the complexity of her voice and emphasizing that the act of telling, rather than naming, is itself a radical form of resistance and self-empowerment.

5. Conclusion

Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* stands as an emotional and groundbreaking exploration of domestic violence, describing the complexities of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse within the context of same-sex intimate partner

[116] Follingstad et al, "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships," 108–109.
[117] Machado, 258.

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relationships. Through the narration of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, Machado dismantles the myths surrounding same-sex intimate partner violence, particularly within lesbian relationships, confronting the misconception that abuse is solely perpetrated by men against women. Her engagement with the Gothic tradition adds a symbolic later, with the Dream House becoming a vessel for horror, oppression, and depersonalisation, reflecting the psychological toll of abuse. Moreover, she demonstrates that women can indeed be perpetrators of violence, debunking the harmful notion that same-sex relationships are immune to the dynamics of abuse.

Machados' innovative formal techniques further enrich the memoir, particularly her use of second-person narration, which serves as both a tool for emotional detachment and a mechanism for inviting the reader to inhabit her experience. This stylistic choice, coupled with her refusal to name her abuser, universalises her trauma while asserting her control over the narrative, subverting traditional notions of victimhood. By blending personal memory with literary genres and narrative experimentation, *In the Dream House* serves as a powerful reflection of the trauma that surrounds domestic violence, particularly within LGTB communities. Through her exploration of the various forms of abuse she endured—from physical assaults to psychological manipulation—Machado exposes the nature of intimate partner violence and its profound impact on survivors. Ultimately, Machado's work not only amplifies the voices of survivors but also challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about abuse, memory, and agency, ensuring its place as a vital text in the ongoing discourse on gendered violence and queer representation.

To conclude, *In The Dream House* is a profound and necessary addition to the literary canon on lesbian domestic violence, offering a multifaceted exploration of abuse within same-sex intimate partner relationships. Due to the lack of representation of SSIPV in lesbian relationships, Carmen Maria Machado's memoir proposes a periscope through which to have a new vision and perspective on lesbian relationships.

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