

# (VULNER)ABILITY: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN PAULA HAWKINS'S NOVELS\*

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## ABSTRACT

The notion of vulnerability has been applied to diverse areas of knowledge, particularly in the last years. However, its denotation has been traditionally attached to negative ideas, such as weakness, passivity or susceptibility to abuse, which results in the victimisation of vulnerable subjects. In this article I aim to reorient the notion of vulnerability, understanding it as a permeable and dynamic term that facilitates the ethical encounter among individuals and that helps vulnerable subjects to regain agency. With this approach, two very popular novels are analysed: Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015), and *Into the Water* (2017). Drawing from Judith Butler's notion of the epistemological frames and Emmanuel Levinas's ethical encounter, the female leading characters of the novels are analysed. In this way, a reflection on the current ways of exploiting women's vulnerability in contemporary west societies is provided. This leads to conclude that vulnerability can be used as a tool of resistance against patriarchal customs.

KEYWORDS: vulnerability, Paula Hawkins, ethics, contemporary, literature.

(VULNER)[H]ABILIDAD: UN ANÁLISIS DE LAS MUJERES  
EN LAS NOVELAS DE PAULA HAWKINS

## RESUMEN

El término de vulnerabilidad se ha aplicado a diversas áreas de conocimiento, especialmente en los últimos años. Sin embargo, su definición se ha relacionado tradicionalmente con ideas negativas como la debilidad, la pasividad o la susceptibilidad al abuso, que dan como resultado la victimización de los sujetos vulnerables. En este artículo se pretende reorientar la noción de vulnerabilidad, entendiéndola como un término permeable y dinámico, que facilita la aproximación ética entre individuos y ayuda a los grupos vulnerables a recuperar y aplicar su voluntad. Con esta aproximación, en este artículo se analizan dos obras muy populares de Paula Hawkins: *La chica del tren* (2015) y *Escrito en el agua* (2017). Partiendo del concepto de los marcos epistemológicos de Judith Butler y de la aproximación ética de Emmanuel Lévinas, se analizan los personajes principales femeninos de las obras. Así se reflexiona sobre la forma en la que se explota la vulnerabilidad de la mujer en sociedades occidentales actuales y se concluye que la vulnerabilidad puede usarse como herramienta de resistencia ante prácticas patriarcales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: vulnerabilidad, Paula Hawkins, ética, literatura, contemporánea.





The concept of vulnerability has been broadly used as an umbrella term to refer to multiple characteristics of human and non-human conditions. In the last years, this notion has become particularly prolific in academia due to its applicability to different fields of study, as Jean-Michel Ganteau states: “the category of vulnerability [...] has come to assume pride of place in the fields of feminism, gender studies, the ethics of care and the Levinasian ethics of alterity, but also those of environmentalism, bioethics, international relations and social politics” (“Vulnerable” 152). However, in the eighties, Emmanuel Levinas already mentioned the notion in his path-breaking study of the ethical connection with alterity when describing the unveiling of the other’s “face” (*Entre Nous* 145). The combination of the dynamics of alterity that Levinas proposed and the permeable meaning that the notion of vulnerability entails offer a rich ground for the analysis of literary texts that include leading vulnerable characters. It is this context that I would like to use here to study two best-selling novels by Paula Hawkins: *The Girl on the Train* (2015) and *Into the Water* (2017). These two novels introduce what we could consider as “vulnerable women” as main characters, but a close reading of the novels will allow us to conclude that the concept of vulnerability can be seen not only as a weakness but as a tool for agency and ethical connection with the other in today’s societies. With that purpose, first, I would like to provide a brief approach to this notion of the Levinasian ethical encounter and the concept of vulnerability itself, then I will move on to analyse both novels by focusing on the mechanisms and elements that contribute in making us consider a woman as “vulnerable”. By emphasising the process that these women go through in the novel, I will finish by underlining the positive features that vulnerability encompasses and how it can be of use for women in patriarchal societies.

These two novels are chosen due to their plots and their leading characters, as I have mentioned before, but also, due to its popularity, which somehow reflects readers’ concerns and interests in today’s societies. *The Girl on the Train* became a worldwide phenomenon, being the fastest-selling adult novel in history (O’CONNOR) with more than 32 million copies sold in 2017 (SHUTEE). The story was later adapted into a Hollywood film in less than a year starring Emily Blunt as Rachel Watson, the protagonist. This undeniable success paved the way for *Into the Water*’s transformation into a bestseller immediately after its publication. In other words: both novels have been eagerly received by contemporary readers. The key of their success, according to Hawkins herself, is that there are elements in her stories that are “universally recognizable” (O’CONNOR). As they portray examples of everyday

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women's lives in contemporary society, these novels offer valuable insights into ways of encountering and dealing with women's vulnerability in current times.

Nevertheless, the connection that Paula Hawkins creates between vulnerability and women in these novels has not been exempt from criticism. Despite their popularity, both novels have encountered mixed reviews by specialists, particularly referring to the representation of women characters in the novels. For instance, Suzi Feay praises Hawkins's "bold move to create such a flawed female lead" in *The Girl on the Train* with whom, she later adds, it is easy to empathise. On the contrary, for the literary scholar Jacqueline Rose, the same novel is full of "hatred women... women [who] lack intelligence" (26). She argues that Hawkins fails at characterisation of her fictional women and that her writing plays against feminist advancements by turning "abuse of women into a treat" (26). *Into the Water* has also found similar divergence in its reviews, being both considered as a "plausible and grimly gripping" follow-up to *The Girl on the Train* but with "signs of growth and greater ambition" (ROBSON) and also as "a dull disappointment of a thriller" (CORRIGAN).

The type of negative reviews based on the female characters' lack of dynamism or on how dislikeable they are fail to acknowledge Hawkins's real achievement in these novels: to challenge the stereotype of women as passive victims who are unable to escape from that position. According to the critic Erinn Gilson, "[t]he view that women's bodies are inherently susceptible to sexual harm is especially problematic [...]. It naturalizes weakness, passivity, receptivity, and object-status as properties of a female body" (*The Ethics* 153). Hawkins disagrees with those stereotypes by presenting female characters who do not fit within those ideals and who are able to move from passivity to agency in their lives and in their relationship towards others, particularly other women. Then, these novels offer an opportunity to understand vulnerability in various forms; not as it has generally been assumed: as annulling, necessarily associated to the powerless and the victims. On the contrary, I propose that vulnerability can be also acknowledged in these texts as a positive condition for women. As Kowino argues, "[t]he productive co-existence of victimhood and agency is ethically and politically empowering (24). Thus, instead of being attached to passivity, I believe vulnerability is a dynamic state, an enabling quality that can help individuals, and especially women who suffer oppression, to regain their agency in contexts of abuse or exploitation.

In "The Trace of the Other" (1986) Levinas explores how the self sees the other as a subject who is considered to be different to oneself. He explains that this perception of otherness is possible through "the face" (351). Despite its name, as we know, Levinas does not refer to literally a face, but rather as he explains in a later work, "a nakedness and stripping away of expression as such; that is, extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself" (*Entre Nous* 145). Therefore, Levinas understands the encounter with the other as an encounter with vulnerability, it could be argued that the connection takes place with the *vulnerable* other.

But what do we understand by "vulnerable"? As Jean Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega have pointed out in *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction* (2017), the notion has been traditionally attached to similar definitions to the ones proposed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that is: to be vulnerable is to



be “wounded, susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury” or “open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature” (3). Thus, whether understood as a physical or a psychological condition, Ganteau and Onega claim, vulnerability points at the human characteristic of being exposed or susceptible to aggression, or also “the condition that makes autonomy impossible, the situation in which the self manifests itself in relation to some constrictive other” (3). This negative understanding of vulnerability has been the one that is traditionally accepted, as both the definitions of the term and the language of everyday conversations and the media show. However, the idea of the vulnerable subject as a being exposed to aggression does not need to be acknowledged as negative in itself, since susceptibility can also entail connection, resilience and readiness. Similarly, I believe that the lack of autonomy that is usually attached to the term does not need to be a defining characteristic of vulnerability, but an element that sometimes can aggravate these situations.

There are other possible interpretations of the notion of vulnerability that help us to reorient the notion towards a more positive understanding. Erinn Gilson has explored the problems that an exclusively negative understanding of vulnerability involves. In *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014) she concludes that vulnerability is a complex notion that cannot be directly attached to violence, nor to empathic understanding of others. Instead, it should be perceived as a “condition of potential” (177) that can entail both positive and negative connotations. However, for Gilson, vulnerability plays a key role in the ethical encounter, as it is “the requisite starting point for such [an ethical] response” (*The Ethics* 179). In fact, if we go back to the Levinasian encounter, the approach towards the vulnerable other calls for an ethical, non-violent connection. For Levinas, the ethical encounter is always asymmetrical, given that the self cannot escape the moral obligations once he/she has seen the “face of the other”. The critic Margrit Shildrick explains this as follows:

[a]lthough initially it is the other who is vulnerable ... and whose suffering humanity invokes response, that response itself –or rather the irresistibility of the call– pitches me also into vulnerability ... It is my moral subjection to the other, my vulnerability in exposure to her vulnerability, that instantiates me as a subject” (92).

It is precisely this duality that enriches the term of vulnerability, providing it with a dynamic quality that can affect both the self and the other. In fact, according to Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, this double direction in which vulnerability works allows the subject to have a more involved connection towards the other: “[O]ne is moved to the other and by the other—exposed to and affected by the other’s vulnerability” (*Dispossession* 1). In this sense, vulnerability is a tool for connection, openness towards the other’s physical or psychological suffering and therefore not necessarily negative, but the opposite: vulnerability can be what facilitates recognition of others and understanding. Thus, vulnerability is not a negative characteristic in itself. It is helpful to draw on Erinn Gilson again, who claims that “[v]ulnerability itself cannot be determined to be the problem, the prime source of harm, and thus to be negative in value. Rather, the problem and that which is unequivocally negative is the exploitation of vulnerability, which amounts to appropriating and determining



its meaning and reductively shaping how it is experienced.” (“Vulnerability” 91). This distinction is essential in the understanding of the notion, as it places the negative connotation of the term not on the vulnerable subject, but on the person who chooses to take advantage of someone else’s vulnerability.

Until now, I have referred to vulnerability as a universal characteristic at the heart of humanity, based on the idea that as human beings, we have a natural tendency towards, at least, a physical vulnerability, which is linked to aging, illness and ultimately death (TURNER 204). However, following Butler, vulnerability is not equally shared among all human beings, on the contrary, “vulnerability becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions” (*Undoing Gender* 22). This is why, for the purposes of this article, I will focus now on vulnerability when applied to women. This is a complex association that does not wish to victimise women, instead, I agree again with Gilson when she claims that the association of vulnerability with women is one of value “because of how it captures and expresses the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of experiences of gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary life” (“Vulnerability” 73).

One way in which I analyse female vulnerable characters is through what Butler calls “epistemological frames” (*Frames of War* 1): implicit and explicit rules that organise human relationships through which we perceive life and others as normal or not. The image of the frame is a powerful one, since it quite literally implies that we organise the world into categories that are enclosed within a fixed idea that is assumed as socially accepted. Everything that does not coincide with these framed ideas is open to rejection and disregard from those who are safely within the frames. In her work, Butler makes clear that the choice of what is included inside or outside those frames is “politically saturated” (*Frames of War* 1), highly marked by power dynamics, which cause that the ones who do not fit are prone to become the other: ignored, incomprehensible and open to the exploitation of their vulnerability. In Butler’s words:

such populations are “lose-able,” or can be forfeited, precisely because they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection ... when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of “the living”. (*Frames of War* 31)

These people’s lives are devalued as less relevant, and their vulnerability becomes more difficult to attend. I consider this is the key mechanism that society still uses to marginalise certain women who do not meet social expectations.

Apart from Butler’s appreciation of the epistemological frames as political, I would add that they are also socially constructed and imposed, as well as subject to one’s personal understanding and experience of the world. The epistemological frames can differ from one person or group of people to another, which has an effect on how people interact or are able to have ethical encounters with each other. If this is the case, it would be interesting to look at which epistemological frames have been traditionally imposed upon women in patriarchal contemporary societies



and how these preconceived ideas of what a “normal” woman must do or how she must look, affect them as individuals and social subjects, as I intend to do in the following analysis of the literary texts.

One way in which this is shown in the novels to be analysed is through the use Paula Hawkins makes of the multiple narrators in her stories. Some critics have seen this as a weakness in the quality of both novels, particularly regarding the complex structure of narrators that Hawkins constructs in her second novel. For instance, Maslin compares it to “a three-ring circus”, according to O’Regan the novel has “a bafflingly large array of characters”, and McDermid concludes that the effect Hawkins achieves is a story “both monotonous and confusing”. Although it is true that the multiple narrators and their unreliability complicate the reading at times, this technique is convenient, particularly within the notion of the epistemological frames, as it provides the reader with different angles of the same event, complicating the existence of an indisputable truth. Hawkins challenges once and again the reader’s expectations, showing that reality cannot be organised in binary terms –good or bad, strong or weak, truth or lie– but only in terms of change and permeability.

In *The Girl on the Train*, the narrative cleverly develops around three middle-aged women struggling with their lives. The first one is Rachel, the leading character, a woman who after discovering she cannot have children, falls into alcoholism and depression. She loses her house, job, and husband, Tom, who marries another woman, Anna, with whom he has a baby. Anna tries to fit into the traditional role of wife and mother, but fails to do so in a balanced way, feeling that she needs to hate and compete against other women. The third woman is Megan, an unhappy wife who exploits her sexuality and her attractiveness to avoid overcoming her real problems. Megan is also Anna’s neighbour and babysitter and the woman Rachel always observes from the train she takes every day. As Feay states, Hawkins succeeds at combining multiple perspectives and different timescales that provoke suspense and empathy. Such effects intensify even more when all the characters’ lives further intertwine, when after one of her alcoholic blackouts, Rachel discovers Megan has disappeared.

Being the protagonist, Rachel’s vulnerability is the most obvious one to the reader, as it is more explored both physically and psychologically. At the most superficial level, Rachel is physically unpleasant to others. Her depression and alcoholism have made her lose interest in her body. Her physical appearance keeps her distant from people who might approach her. She is aware of this in several occasions in the novel. For instance, when she observes how a man looks at her in the train: “his glance travels over me ... He looks away. There’s something about the set of his mouth which suggests distaste. He finds me distasteful” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 27), or at another point in the novel she notes: “two girls sitting across the carriage look at me and then at each other, with a sly exchange of smiles. I don’t know what they think of me, but I know it isn’t good” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 32). As a result of this physical rejection, she cannot remember when the last time she had physical contact with someone was: “a hug, or a heartfelt squeeze of my hand ... my heart twitches” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 21).



This lack of physical connection with anyone along with the sense of being left aside consolidates her feeling of vulnerability as someone who is to be rejected or marginalised: “I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I’m off-putting in some way. It’s not just that I’ve put on weight, or that my face is puffy from the drinking and the lack of sleep; it’s as if people can see the damage written all over me, they can see it in my face” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 27); a statement that immediately reminds us of Levinas’s description of the other’s face. At this level, an ethical encounter is difficult to take place, as people can only feel sorry for her, but they cannot empathise or be ethically moved towards her, this lack of contact does not help to her own self-consideration: “his [an old co-worker’s] pity was almost palpable. I’d never realized, not until the last year or two of my life, how shaming it is to be pitied” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 53). She assumes her own sense of self in these new terms, referring to the happy, sober, and attractive woman she used to be as an entirely different individual: “when I was still myself”, (HAWKINS, *Girl* 60); which contrasts with her current feeling: “I’m the outsider” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 94), as she later claims.

Rachel’s psychological vulnerability is more complex if we analyse her process of decay, which is a succession of unlucky events that situates her in a vulnerable position. She was devastated by her father’s death just before she met Tom, who seemed to be the ideal husband. After they got married, she realises she cannot not have children, which leads her to depression and then to alcoholism. It is not until the end of the novel it is that we learn that Tom takes advantage of her moments of inebriation to threaten and abuse her, both physically and psychologically. After her alcoholic blackouts, he makes her believe that she was the one being violent and dangerous to him and to others. In other words, Tom exploits Rachel’s vulnerability in a way that prevents her from having control over her own life.

This situation only stops because Rachel discovers that Tom is having an affair with Anna and that results in the ending of their marriage. However, Rachel feels she has been the problem all along, particularly when she discovers that only she was infertile “I was wrong to suggest that we should share the blame; it was all down to me” (HAWKINS, *Girl* 111). All these events leave a traumatic imprint in Rachel’s personality, since these psychological issues are never resolved. Instead, she assumes she must apologise for things she has not even done, or that she does not remember: “I had to beg him [Tom] to tell me what it was that I’d done [...] if you can’t remember what you’ve done, your mind just fills in all the blanks and you think the worst possible things [...]”. (HAWKINS, *Girl* 297). It could be said that Rachel’s vulnerability, as Jules’s in *Into the Water*, is closely attached to trauma. This association is not new to Ganteau, who argues that vulnerability is a crucial element in the current understanding of the subject in trauma studies; in his words: “it seems as though vulnerability, in the wake of –or alongside– trauma, has become a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture, and a template for the wounded contemporary subject” (*The Ethics* 4). Actually, all the events involved in her downfall contribute to identify her as a wounded subject, but Tom’s exploitation of her alcoholic blackouts is particularly critical, as it determines Rachel’s sense of identity as “othered”.





Her process of healing begins when she starts seeing a therapist and realises that some of her memories are distorted and reshaped by his ex-husband's comments and deeds. Later, when she suffers physical violence at the hands of Scott, Megan's husband, she clearly remembers that she had undergone domestic abuse before with Tom. This fits with Van der Kolk's explanation of subjects suffering from partial amnesia: "[e]motions and sensations seem to be the critical cues for the retrieval of information [...] the motions attached to any particular experience play a major role in determining what cognitive schemes will be activated [...] many people with trauma histories, such as rape, spouse battering and child abuse, seem to function relatively well as long as feelings related to traumatic memories are not stirred up" (100). It seems that part of the traumatic memory that Rachel had repressed is reactivated when she goes through similar emotions.

Her psychological vulnerability combines with her physical dimension in her inability to have children, an issue that I have just mentioned above but that it is key for understanding Rachel as a vulnerable character in the novel. Although motherhood is inevitably linked to her body, what can be inferred from her discourse has deeper implications that also shape Rachel's sense of self. When the protagonist discovers she is barren, she feels that nobody can truly comprehend her sorrow, not even her husband at the moment: "he never understood that it's possible to miss what you've never had, to mourn for it" (HAWKINS, *Girl* 112). This grief is explained by Paula Hawkins in an interview in which she tells how some women live their infertility as "a bereavement [...] which is not treated by anyone else in this way" (WHEELERCENTER). People tend to act in a way that does not help these women, as Rachel describes in a very powerful part of the novel:

The thing about being barren is that you're not allowed to get away from it. [...] My friends were having children, friends of friends were having children, pregnancy and birth and first birthday parties were everywhere. I was asked about it all the time. My mother, our friends, colleagues at work. When was it going to be my turn? At some point our childlessness became an acceptable topic of Sunday-lunch conversation, not just between Tom and me, but more generally [...] failure cloaked me like a mantle, it overwhelmed me, dragged me under and I gave up hope". (HAWKINS, *Girl* 111)

This passage clearly shows the result of the exploitation of an epistemological frame that has been so well ingrained within the social understanding of women as mothers that when couples reach some stability or a woman turns a certain age, maternity seems to move from a private topic to a public one. The pressure that is imposed as a result can have negative effects on the involved subjects when they cannot fulfill those expectations, as Rachel's case shows. Her inability to meet social standards for a woman of her age leads her to conclude: "I'm not beautiful and I can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless" (HAWKINS, *Girl* 112).

I will not delve into a perusal of the characters of Anna and Megan. However, it is worth mentioning that motherhood is a common element in the three characters, essential to their development as vulnerable subjects in different ways.





Anna becomes vulnerable through her strong attachment to her only daughter, and an uncontrollable need to protect her at all times due to the threat that Rachel means to her. This takes her to the point of losing part of her own identity in favor of her child. She feels constantly judged by others on her choices and abilities as a mother—particularly by other mothers, which suggests that it is probably a shared concern—. For her part, Megan, despite her temporal job as babysitter, dislikes children in general and cannot answer to the traditional role of perfect wife and mother that her husband—quite insistently—expects from her. We later learn that this rejection comes from an unresolved traumatic motherhood in her teenage years that resulted in her daughter's death. But again, her impossibility to match a woman's socially expected role leads her to construct a whole different self to elude disapproval. She exploits her sexuality to avoid feeling vulnerable, until she gets pregnant and the problem arises again. Thus, it can be observed how the exploitation of the same epistemological frame—motherhood in this case—can affect subjects in varied ways, leading to equally negative results.

In spite of suffering such a strong vulnerability, Rachel's state can also be understood as potential and dynamic, given that she goes through a positive process turning her vulnerable position into agency. In Hawkins's own words in an interview with Linda Morris: "we see her [Rachel], over the course of the book, fighting her demons and becoming stronger". What is significant is that she does become stronger, but it is through her encounter with others. Turning to the other's "face" and trying to act ethically. In the process, she recovers her old sense of self: "I feel like myself—the myself I used to be" (HAWKINS, *Girl* 134). Her investigations will lead her to rediscover those oppressed traumatic memories I referred to before. When she realises that Tom exploited her physical and psychological vulnerability during her marriage, instead of looking for revenge, she tries to approach and help the person who in her view, is now in the most vulnerable position: Anna. Throughout the novel, both characters work as antagonists. They are very distant and they express their enmity and differences several times. However, at the end, both of them are able to have an ethical encounter and see that they are, in reality, very similar. They can finally see each other's "face" and understand they are more powerful when they work together against the real cause of their pain. This resonates with Caruth's argument of connection between traumatised victims: "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). These encounters can also occur among vulnerable subjects; whose own vulnerability predispose them to look for the other's face and act ethically.

At the end, Anna and Rachel together are able to commit the brutal act of agency against the exploiter of their vulnerability. Only an understanding of vulnerability as a dynamic characteristic enables this encounter, because it creates a change: vulnerability is understood as openness towards the other, agency and connection. At the end, they even make a pact constructed around what remains unsaid: "We are tied together, forever bound by the stories we told" (HAWKINS, *Girl* 409). The secret they keep make them close and powerful. I shall return later



to discuss the notion of silence, but for now I must say that the way it is used makes it a key element in the possible exploitation of women's vulnerability.

In *Into the Water*, Hawkins choose to multiply the number of narrators to at least eleven, combining third and first person discourse with inner monologues and chapters from Nel Abbot's unpublished manuscript on her investigations around women who died in the Drowning Pool. Despite this multiplicity, women are still essential to the story. When Nel is found dead in the Drowning Pool, her estranged sister, Jules, is forced to go back to her hometown to look after a niece she does not know, Lena. Nel Abbot's case intertwines with a similar one that happened months before, the teenager Katie's.

Throughout the novel, Hawkins creates a continuum of vulnerability linked to women in the fictional village of Beckford, "an extremely unhealthy habitat for women", as Maslin argues. In fact, through Nel's manuscript, the reader has access to the lives of vulnerable women during the history of the village; stories dating from 1659 onwards that include women who were accused of witchcraft, suffered domestic violence, sexual abuse, unhappy marriages, suicide and murders. What is significant is that despite the social advancements since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hawkins introduces contemporary female characters that still suffer the same fate that those other women in the past for reasons that are not too different. They are, as one critic has described, "strong but ultimately flawed women, modern-day witches" (GORDON 42). Or in other words: women who struggle with the imposed dynamics of power that places them in a particular social role, living in patriarchal societies in which sexism has refined and transformed, but not disappeared. With this continuum of vulnerable women, Hawkins seems to be implying that there is still much more to fight for in terms of women's rights and that a revision of the concept of vulnerability is necessary.

Through her recollections, we learn that Jules has also been outside Butler's "epistemological frames", and, therefore, she has been "the other" since she was a teenager, having serious problems to have any ethical encounter, or any social encounter at all, with anyone else. She was the unpopular, unattractive and lonely teenager, while her sister Nel enjoyed being all the opposite, as Jules remembers: "I didn't shine. Nel shone" (HAWKINS, *Water* 64); "[I was] the blob, the embarrassment: *Julia*, fat, ugly, uncool" (HAWKINS, *Water* 42). She is forced to build her own sense of self during her teenage years, through experiences of physical and psychological abuse that nobody in her family helps to mitigate, especially not Nel. As Jules still remembers in the present: "I heard one of the local boys talking. 'She *must* be adopted. There's no way that fat bitch is Nel Abbot's real sister.' [...] I looked to her [Nel] for comfort, but all I saw was shame." (HAWKINS, *Water* 62 emphasis in original). As Butler argues in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), we are also vulnerable to language and its wounding power, when it is repeatedly used against us. Butler claims in this book that constant linguistic abuse contributes to the process through which subjects become subjugated (27). Jules embraced this subjugation for years, assuming constant mistreatment by those around her as normal. Among her memories, there is one which is particularly painful: a day when Nel's friends were bullying her as usual, aiming at her with a ball because she was "a big target [...] you



couldn't hit a barn door but you can't miss that arse" (HAWKINS, *Water* 65), when after several blows, everybody realises that Jules is bleeding. They stop then, only to see that the ball was not the cause of the blood, but her period. "I was bleeding properly, heavily [...] [a]nd they were looking at me, all of them, staring at me." (HAWKINS, *Water* 65). It seems relevant to observe how women's bodies are again open to be treated as something public, even if for different reasons to previously mentioned. In spite of being natural, directly connected to a woman's sign of good health, youth or fertility, menstrual periods in Western contemporary societies can be still used as a tool to stigmatise women. Roberts and Waters argue that this is the case "in societies with a patriarchal, white male standard of normalcy" (17) and point at the advertising strategies as one of the possible mechanisms that help to perpetuate menstruation as taboo nowadays:

Perhaps more than any other bodily function, menstruation must be kept "under wraps" in a sexually objectifying culture. Although no longer confined to menstrual huts, Western women must nevertheless conceal menstruation [...]. Countless advertisements are designed to induce anxiety that men might find out; these ads imply that such revelation would mean a devastating decrease of a woman's attractiveness and popularity. (6)

Jules's already fragile popularity is, indeed, completely destroyed after that moment. Shame forces her to leave the river's bank where she was reading and to hide at home. Roberts and Waters also argue that this stigmatisation of the menstrual bleeding is particularly dangerous during puberty, a moment in which teenage girls tend to look for others' approval. If this endorsement is neglected or their menstruation is linked to shame, as it is Jules's case, this can take girls to "self-loathing and disorder eating" (17), two actions that, as we know, Jules carries out. Her traumatic episode with menstruation paves the way for the culmination of years of loneliness and submissiveness, since that same night Robbie, Nel's boyfriend, rapes her. It is significant that just before he rapes her, he triggers Jules's shame by saying: "Don't worry. I don't mind a bit of blood" (HAWKINS, *Water* 108).

We can see then how the confrontation between public and private keeps working as an epistemological frame that helps to exacerbate vulnerability; particularly physical, but which can develop into a psychological one. After the sexual assault, feeling "[h]umiliated, ashamed. Guilty" (HAWKINS, *Water* 166), Jules goes into the dangerous waters of the Drowning Pool and Nel saves her from a possible drowning. Years later, referring to that night, Nel tells Jules: "Tell me honestly. Wasn't there some part of you that liked it?" (HAWKINS, *Water* 57). Jules misunderstands Nel and believes her sister is blaming her for the rape, making fun of her and that, as the rapist also had stated, she should "be grateful" (HAWKINS, *Water* 108) because no other boy would have had sex with her otherwise. From that moment onwards, the relationship between the two sisters breaks forever: Jules stops talking to Nel, avoids her calls and moves outside the village.

However, this traumatic experience leaves a trace in Jules's personality that she cannot escape when she goes back to the house where the events happened.



Back in her hometown, Jules's suppressed traumatic memories are triggered, as she describes as soon as she arrives to Beckford: "I heard the water and I smelled the earth, the earth in the shadow of the house, underneath the trees, in the places untouched by sunlight, the acrid stink of rotting leaves, and the smell transported me back in time" (HAWKINS, *Water* 12). As was Rachel's case in the previous novel, in *Into the Water*, as the story unfolds, Jules is forced to face repressed traumas that were never resolved, due to the repetition of negative emotions, "all my energy was sapped by the effort it took to push back against memories I hadn't let surface for over half a lifetime, memories which rose now like drifwood water" (HAWKINS, *Water* 231). This "uncanny repetition" (CARUTH 9) of the traumatic past is another way in which their physical and psychological vulnerability manifest. Jules starts having bulimic episodes again, "[a] habit long abandoned but so old it felt almost like comfort [...] the blood vessels in my face strained to bursting point, my eyes streaming as a purged" (HAWKINS, *Water* 54). She also suffers visions, flashbacks, fear and all this results in a reluctance to approach her niece, the person who constantly reminds her of Nel, as a way of avoiding her sorrow and her past. However, like Rachel in *The Girl on the Train*, she is ultimately able to use her vulnerable position to move forwards, and do some good, trying to discover what happened to both her sister and Katie.

In a parallel way, the reader has also access to Nel's past life and the way her death is received by different neighbours and acquaintances. This information contrasts with Jules's perception of her sister's popularity. The reader discovers that Nel had Lena out of her relationship with Robbie, which is obliquely described as abusive; she raises Lena alone and has a difficult relationship with her. Before her death, Nel used to sleep with a troubled and married man and she was rejected by most people around Beckford due to her unconventionality as a woman and her persistence to investigate the Drowning pool and the women who died there. In fact, most of her old acquaintances and neighbours do not grieve Nel's death, something that reminds of Butler's description of the outsiders to the epistemological frames, whose deaths pass unmentioned and that she described as "lose-able" and "cast as threats to human life" (*Frames of War* 31).

In this way, Nel is similar to Jules and Rachel, as she was also othered by those around her, particularly, when she chose to fight against women's vulnerability and tell the truth about the Drowning Pool and the reasons that led women to die there. In the prologue to her book, her intentions are made clear: "There are those who would rather not ask those questions, who would rather hush, suppress, silence. But I have never been one for quiet." (HAWKINS, *Water* 38). After her investigations, she later concludes: "Beckford is not a suicide spot. Beckford is a place to get rid of troublesome women" (HAWKINS, *Water* 83). In her book, Nel was trying to give voice to women who were labelled as different, who had difficulties at playing the role they were supposed to assume as women in a particular social moment, but this makes herself vulnerable as well, exposed to other's criticism and rejection.

On her part, Jules's investigation will take her to confront the source of her traumas: Robbie. This meeting is essential to the story, not only because it is the moment in which Jules faces her own vulnerability, but also because it gives two fundamental clues to understand today's ways of exploiting women's vulnerability:



sexual consent and silence. When Jules speaks to him about the night of the assault, Robbie denies he ever raped her and tries to find possible reasons to explain why she was crying at the moment of the violation or why she asked him to stop: “you cried ‘cos [sic] it was your first time [...] because it hurt a bit. You never said you didn’t want it. You never said no [...] I could have whatever I wanted [...]. You honestly think I needed to rape a fat cow like you?” (HAWKINS, *Water* 234). This terrible explanation of the sexual abuse provided by the rapist speaks of the importance of sexual consent. The problem is not that he does not remember the assault as Jules does or that they had different feelings towards each other, but that he was and still is convinced that his then superior position of physically stronger, more attractive, popular, older, and male made the sexual encounter implicitly consented, despite the woman’s opinion or behaviour. In addition, Jules’s conversation with Robbie also speaks of the role of silence in exploiting vulnerability. Jules never talks about the rape during her adolescence or adulthood, partly because of her refined submissive identity over the years and partly because after she is rescued from the river, Nel makes Jules swear she will not tell anyone:

‘Promise me, Julia. [...] you won’t tell anyone about this. OK? Not ever. We can’t talk about it, all right? Because...Because we’ll get into trouble. OK? Just don’t talk about it. If we don’t talk about it, it’s like it didn’t happen. Nothing happened, OK? Nothing happened. Promise me. Promise me, Julia, you’ll never speak about it again’. I kept my promise. (HAWKINS, *Water* 168)

However, keeping the promise only aggravates her anxiety. It is not as if nothing happened, but the contrary: the rape becomes an unspeakable trauma for Jules. Her sense of reality, time and memory are disrupted, so that she constantly moves to the past unconsciously. David Morris argues in *The Evil Hours* (2015), his book on trauma, that this in-between temporal and emotional state is physically manifested in traumatised rape victims who confront their attackers through a return to the original traumatic emotional state. This causes an adrenaline increase (125), which explains Jules’s emotions on her way to see Robbie: “the fog of tiredness clearing, my limbs loosening [...] savagely hungry [...] [s]ome old part of me, some furious fearless relic, had surfaced” (HAWKINS, *Water* 230-1).

Despite this momentary courage, the truth is that the rape has been concealed within the walls of silence for years, until it becomes an event that only affects Jules. Silence enables Robbie to have a normal life, while it condemns Jules to have a tortuous youth and adulthood. Silence then is linked to the lack of agency and freedom, while it underpins the exploitation of vulnerability. As the writer and activist Rebecca Solnit explains in her chapter “A Short History of Silence”, “silence is what allows predators to rampage through the decades, unchecked” (22). As we learn from Nel’s manuscript, this silence has been present in Beckford for centuries, supported by a secretive and patriarchal society in which “[p]eople turned a blind eye [...] [n]o one liked to think about the fact that the water in that river was infected with the blood and bile of persecuted women, unhappy women; they drank it every day” (HAWKINS, *Water* 18).



Silence separates the sisters in life, and their attempts to break it brings them together again. It is only when Jules finally speaks up and confronts her rapist that the silence is broken and Jules realises that Nel never knew about the rape. The promise of silence was not about it, but about her almost death in the water:

When you said, *I'm sorry he hurt you*, you meant you were sorry I felt rejected. When you said, *What did you expect?* you meant that of course he would reject me, I was just a child. And when you asked me, *Wasn't there some part of you that liked it?* you weren't talking about sex, you were talking about the water. (HAWKINS, *Water* 236, emphasis in original)

Confronting the truth will make Jules realise how vulnerable she has been and how much she has ignored her sister's "face", using Levinas's terms, over the years for no reason. At this point, vulnerability acts as an enabling condition that helps her to take control over her life again, trying to reconstruct her shattered self so that she can have more ethical connection towards others. In this way, she builds bridges towards her niece and approaches her the way she did not with her sister, which also shows again how mothering becomes a powerful link among women, even after death:

I cannot make up to you the things I did wrong –my refusal to listen to you, my eagerness to think the worst of you, my failure to help you when you were desperate [...] my atonement will have to be an act of motherhood [...] I could not be a sister to you, but I will try to be a mother to your child. (HAWKINS, *Water* 346)

The process that both Rachel and Jules go through is replicated in other female characters as well. Megan and Anna in *The Girl on the Train* or Lena in *Into the Water* also follow similar steps that could be simplified as follows: first a vulnerable woman is introduced, second, the story develops and both the reader and the character herself discover the source of her vulnerability: what or who has provoked it and who is exploiting it. Then, the woman stops allowing that exploitation, or at least is aware of it, which makes her take control over her situation. Finally, this change, or rather, the experience of vulnerability in first person, allows her to be more empathic and more open towards connection with others. The character's progress is only possible if we understand her vulnerability as a dynamic condition.

In the novels analysed the stories are built around women whose lives are difficult; women who are vulnerable to physical and psychological aggression due to their inability (or choice) not to follow female expected roles in society. Therefore, we can consider the epistemological frames as the main tool through which characters deliberately marginalise, attack, and abuse women either psychologically or sexually, and an example of how female vulnerability is exploited in contemporary societies.

Although the epistemological frames would be the wide category under which other elements rely, there are particular ways in which they are applied, resulting in exploiting women's vulnerability, something that has also emerged in the analysis of the novels. First, motherhood is an issue so normalised in society that it is sometimes regarded as something public, in spite of being ultimately personal,





which can have serious consequences in an individual's sense of development and fulfillment, particularly in the case of the woman who either gets, cannot or does not want to become pregnant. Second, silence has stood out as a relevant tool for exploitation, it is an ally of abusers who wish to take advantage of someone's vulnerable position. This is why these novels also speak of the necessity to either break the silence, particularly among women, as Nel attempts to do in her book or Jules does when she confronts her rapist; or to turn it into a tool against those who try to perpetrate and normalise abuse against women (either sexual or not), as the secret between Anna and Rachel proves at the end of *The Girl on the Train*.

In the portrayal of exploitation, I believe it is significant to mention how Paula Hawkins does not only focus on the male exploiter, she also exemplifies the ethical approach that occurs among women. She illustrates the tensions that have been traditionally associated to sex: social expectations, assumed as the standard that have been imposed upon us, resulting sometimes in negative relationships, or unnecessary rivalry. These novels underline that reducing women's relationships in terms of competence is also socially constructed. The literary works analysed in this article finish by highlighting the necessity to establish ethical bonds among women and leave behind this myth that female relationships must be antagonistic, a belief that according to the writer Roxane Gay "is like heels and purses—pretty but designed to SLOW women down" (47 capitals in original).

In spite of exploring different forms of women's exploitation, I believe the idea of vulnerability that the novels contain is ultimately positive, given that in the end, the women in the stories are able to use their vulnerability wisely to have ethical connections with others and to regain control over their lives. In this way, we can conclude that vulnerable women are turned into agents of their own lives and thus, vulnerability can be understood not necessarily as a weakness but as a part of themselves that can be used to move forwards and to approach others ethically. However, it would be a mistake to think of these novels as postfeminist readings, whose understanding of the feminist movement is of a fight that was won by women long ago and it is no longer required. As de la Concha cleverly analyses, those types of literary works place the responsibility of women's vulnerability on individual female characters alone, but failing "to take into account the social and relational character of female precariousness" (84). Quite the contrary, as I hope to have shown, these novels emphasise the power of vulnerability as a relational tool that is particularly useful among women in times of patriarchal oppression in supposedly developed, western, modern societies. Vulnerability is here presented as a tool of connection and resistance for women. These novels do not trivialise the experiences of rape, trauma or domestic abuse, but they offer a silver lining in the midst of terror.

This is why the positive account of the notion of vulnerability that is drawn from these novels offers possible future avenues of research that are also a reflection of our modern societies. Contemporary British works of fiction are portraying more and more often stories of characters who struggle with their vulnerability and are able to use it in relational ways. At the same time, this vulnerability is taking more diverse forms, representing people of all ages, races, cultures, social levels, beliefs, etc., which also mirrors our contemporary societies and that also speaks of a necessity





to break multiple silences. The popularity of these works seems to point at both an interest in readers and a tendency in contemporary fiction. Novels like Hawkins's help to make the exploitation of women's vulnerability visible, thus contributing in the non-fictional world to prevent this exploitation from happening.

As a theoretical concept, the idea of the notion of vulnerability as not fixed, but dynamic, permeable to different situations and individuals is enriching. It is not restricted to just one valid reading. It also endorses its possible negative connotations, but it acknowledges and underlines its positive quality and its potential to the relational and ethical subject. In this way, the concept is not completely changed, just reoriented, wider in its definition. Apart from its traditional attachment to weakness or susceptibility to harm, now the notion can also be linked to agency, endurance, power, or ethical connection. In this way, the term shows its potential when applied to fiction: it works as a call for readers to break our assumed "epistemological frames" so that we can turn to the other's face and look at alterity in a more ethical way.

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