As malas mulleres
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Set between the years 1863 and 1865 at a Galician prison called A Galera, Marilar Aleixandre's Blanco Amor prize-winning novel, As malas mulleres (Wicked Women), is centered around the real-life prison reformer Concepción Arenal and a fictional teenage prisoner named Francisca, or Sisca. Written in a close third-person that alternates between the women's perspectives, the novel opens with Sisca's processing into the prison at age fifteen, where the nuns in charge begin by shaving her head and leveling insults at her. For her part, Arenal has just arrived from her home of Madrid to the relatively smaller city of A Coruña to begin her post as Surveyor of A Galera.

As both women will very quickly come to realize, the conditions there are woefully inadequate. Among other things, the prisoners are only allowed to bathe once a month and aren't permitted the means to clean their own cells, leading to a severe lack of hygiene; the bread they're fed is often so spoiled it has worms in it; they're hardly allowed to communicate with each other; and they're forced work as seamstresses, all while being treated as less than human by the nuns.

While they both struggle through their daily adversities, the companionship of other women will become a pillar that holds them up. In Sisca's case, she finds friendship, and later a budding romance, in a fellow prisoner named Fefa, also known as "The Wolf." In Arenal's case, her friend the widowed countess Juana María de Vega (another real figure, and even more of a progressive) provides her counsel and support as she seeks to make institutional change and improve the prisoners' lives in the short term with the help of a local women's society. There's also a third companion, Paquita, the woman who runs Juana María's house and, as the novel heavily implies, her longtime partner. It was also Paquita who hired Sisca, took her under her wing, and taught her to read until her untimely death, but Sisca's memories of her time with Paquita are some of her fondest, and provide a bittersweet counterpoint to the bleakness of her life in prison.

Though both Arenal's and Sisca's sections are full of flashbacks to their past lives, it's only about halfway through that we learn how Sisca ended up in prison, tearing her away from her hopeful young life where she had even begun to see a local boy named Xacobe. Her mother, fearing mortal danger from a new pregnancy, sought an abortion (or a "miscarriage," as it's referred to in the novel) and ultimately died from complications. Sisca was later arrested when a pair of Civil Guards came to take her mother's body away—not fit for Christian burial, apparently—and she flew into a blind rage and attacked them. It's this seemingly understandable crime that finds Sisca thrown out of her young life. For Arenal's part, her flashbacks aren't central to the plot in the same way, but they help establish her character and provide more historical background to this anti-liberal era.

But there is also a third narrative strand which tells us how some of the other women came to be in prison too. It comes in a set of linked chapters under the same header: "The Mute Chorus of the

Wicked Women." Each is told from the first-person perspective of one of the prisoners, though the voice is always the same: a lyrical, oldfashioned register and a preponderance of brief folk poems reminiscent of the poetry of Rosalía de Castro, a major Galician literary figure whose poetry the women's society reads at the prison. As well as providing a more poetic tone to the novel (besides having written seven novels and countless books for younger readers, Aleixandre is also an accomplished poet), these chapters provided added weight to the growing sense that most of the women in the prison are there for trite, or understandable reasons, whether to feed their children or escape a bad situation. Even Fefa, who's in prison for murder, claims to have been framed by a disgruntled employee.

Regardless, a couple years into Sisca's sentence, Fefa decides to make an escape by knocking out a chaplain and walking out in his cassock. In less dramatic fashion, Sisca, too, will ultimately find herself outside the bounds of the prison before her sentence is up. Having realized the connection between Sisca and Paquita, who died a few years before, Juana María decides to honor Paquita by interceding on Sisca's behalf to secure an early release, and counsels her to try to become a teacher. But first, Sisca will pay one last visit to Fefa, who is living "outside the law" and dressing as a man to avoid notice, to say a final farewell. Meanwhile, Arenal, who is happy to see Sisca freed, struggles with how she can affect change in the face of the government's obstinacy and indolence, and recalibrating her more conservative ideologies as they are often implicitly challenged by the prisoners she interacts with.

The novel closes with a pair of epilogues. The first is a reproduction of a female teacher's contract from the era, with rules so rigid we can't help but see it as a sort of open-air imprisonment. The second is a letter from Xacobe, the local boy Sisca had been seeing, where he tells Sisca he has been waiting for her to get out of prison so that they can make a life together.

There's a certain disjoint in these final pages, as if the author wasn't quite sure on what note to end the novel. On the one hand, her inclusion of the teacher's contract seems in keeping with the frequently bleak portrayal of life for these impoverished, imprisoned women, and seems meant to counterbalance the suddenly very rosy conclusion to Sisca's story. But then the novel comes back with another rosy, altogether too neat conclusion to Sisca's story, and one that arguably cheapens all the wellwrought effort to portray the budding relationship and heartfelt farewell between Fefa and Sisca. It was this was the relationship that felt true; Xacobe was a minor character, a figure from Sisca's past, and to end with his words, however kindly and hopeful, seems out of keeping with a novel so focused on centering women and their voices.

Still, As malas mulleres makes for an engaging, edifying read. As a work of historical fiction, it deftly avoids the pitfalls of attributing contemporary perspectives or worldviews to its characters, while still finding the relevance of the story to our current era. Aleixandre, a veteran novelist, expertly balances Sisca and Arenal's chapters, interspersing them with the occasional "Mute Chorus" chapters, to make for a buoyant, fast-paced read, and one that accentuates dramatic tensions at the same time as it provides nuance to parts of the story we have already witnessed from the other side. Her prose is swift and elegant, and she does an excellent job of giving a distinct personality and tone to each of her three distinct narrative voices.

The novel sits comfortably in a climate where prison reform and abolition are frequent topics of debate. With its historical focus, it distinguishes itself from bestsellers like Rachel Kushner's The Mars Room or fellow Galician Inma López Silva's When We Were Wicked. However, certain aspects of the Galician and Spanish context may pose trouble for a translator and/or publisher into English. While it must be said that the author provides a good deal of historical context and background for some of her characters and this time period, there are other aspects that may be lost on an English reader who will necessarily be less familiar with other historical figures or contexts that are not

given as much airtime in the book.

The real figures of Concepción Arenal and Juana María both receive wellfleshed-out backgrounds and histories here, but less so Rosalía de Castro, who never appears in the novel, but comes up often. The Galician-language reader will need no introduction to her, she's arguably the most famous modern Galician writer. But the English reader with less background may be confused why it's portrayed so significantly when Juana María gifts Sisca a copy of one of De Castro's books, which she will later give to Fefa. The idea that they're both rural Galician women who likely speak primarily Galican, the language the book is written in, is mostly relegated to the subtext, and it seems unlikely an English reader will pick up on the significance. What's more, the "Mute Chorus" chapters are so heavily indebted to De Castro's poetry that they risk losing their weight for readers who don't immediately pick up on the connection.

Nonetheless, these challenges are not insurmountable, and take nothing from the fact that As malas mulleres is an engaging work of historical fiction. With its unique spin on a contemporary problem, publishers of translated literature may well be interested in taking a closer look.