Ceniza en la boca
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This book is a visceral response to the inequalities of our world, particularly the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy. Told in the first person by an unnamed woman, it is the story of two siblings navigating a confusing, cruel world that offers them little. It tells of their experience emigrating from Mexico to seek a better life in Spain only to exchange one set of hardships for another.

The plot is extremely well constructed. Divided into four parts the novel addresses the different stages of the narrator's life with the action taking place in Mexico, past and present, and two Spanish cities, Madrid and Barcelona. The novel turns around a central axis, the suicide of the narrator's younger brother, Diego, and explores themes of betrayal, belonging, and otherness as the narrator sets out on an emotional and physical Odyssey to understand her brother's self-destruction, herself, and her relationships with all the people in her life.

Beginning with her childhood in Mexico, the narrator's life is marked by violence and loss: the narrator's own birth was probably the result of rape and a brief period of happiness when her mother marries and has Diego is cut short by death of this husband. After her husband's death, the narrator's mother then sets off for Madrid leaving her two children behind. This feels like the first betrayal of many as, although the children are nominally in the care of their grandparents, it falls to the narrator, still a child herself, to look after her little brother. The distance between the narrator and her mother continues to widen throughout the novel: initially physical it becomes an almost complete emotional disconnect even when the family is reunited several years later in Madrid.

Facing racism, a lack of opportunity, and the apparent indifference of her mother, the narrator tries to make a life of her own by moving to Barcelona—leaving Diego alone in a place he hates. But here, the same traps of poverty and outsider-ship shrivel her dreams and, when her brother commits suicide, her sense of guilt at not having protected him is overwhelming.

After Diego's cremation, the narrator returns to Mexico with his ashes and experiences another betrayal. The country she returns to is a far cry from the one she remembers from her childhood—broken and torn apart by violence it offers no solace and no answers. Now totally rootless, the narrator ruminates on her brother's obsession with his own death and questions about the value of life, and specifically which lives are worth living. The narrator struggles with Diego's nihilistic answer to this question but although her desperation to find an alternative is palpable, the book ends as it began: with Diego's death.

This is a powerful book, and not for the squeamish. It covers many themes ranging from an exploration of uneasy family relationships across many generations, to the experience of emigration

and facing up to racism and prejudice to create a sense of belonging.

One criticism that could be levelled at the work is that it is simply a litany of complaint against the unfairness of the world and while all immigrants face challenges and some degree of prejudice they don't all take their own lives. However, it would be a misinterpretation of the book to see it as a manifesto of self-pity and the quality of the writing takes it to many other levels. Although the book revolves around Diego's suicide and the reasons for it, the real essence of the book is its nuanced exploration of guilt and grieving. The result is an engrossing drama peopled with entirely three dimensional characters in the form of the narrator and her family.

The author weaves the plot in such a way as to take us through the narrator's grieving process with her, slowly revealing her emotional landscape. It is an Odyssey in which the narrator comes to know herself and like the hero of legend, she is tested, she fails, she is resilient, she reveals her faults. The effect is utterly engaging and leads us—and the narrator— to discover that her anger at Diego less about the hardship of their life and their lack of control over what happened to them, in fact, it is more about the betrayal she feels about being left alone—again—to deal with that life. Worst of all, however, is the accusation implicit in Diego's actions that her own life, despite her efforts, is not worth living.

Despite the difficult content of the novel, the author's style makes it a surprisingly easy read. The writing is frank, unsentimental and every element, however dreadful, seems necessary. One of the novel's particular strengths is the way it contrasts noise and silence. One hand it screams pain describing the injustices and violence experienced by its protagonists, but on the other it contains huge vacuums of silence in the atomization of the family, the inability to make social networks, the hushing up of domestic and sexual abuse. This makes the book disturbing at times, but also addictive with much of its emotional impact coming from the secrets kept and the points at which characters bite their tongues and don't speak.

A particularly interesting device is the author's use of what might be described as 'torrential' dialogue: there is no formal indication of speech and no separation between speakers, peppered with colourful Mexican expletives, these floods of words are also often interspersed with asides by the narrator. There is a rhythm and poetry to these sections of dialogue that makes them a particularly effective way of getting across the overwhelming nature of the narrator's pain as she struggles with the dissonances in her life: the unacknowledged racism of her Scottish boyfriend, her need for friendship as an individual rather than as a fellow immigrant, and her rage when she finds Diego stealing from her. These dialogues are dynamic intensely emotional cacophonies of words forming a contrast to the more measured style of the rest of the novel they leap out of the text and draw the reader into the narrator's mind.

The music of Diego's favourite band, Vampire Weekend, is a constant theme throughout the novel. As a story about a relationship between two siblings from childhood into early adulthood the inclusion of pop music seems appropriate. It is also a device that gives Diego's character an additional dimension—a credibility—that he might not otherwise have as we know him only through the recollections of his sister. The experience of emigration and the rejection Diego and his sister encounter in their new home requires them to demonstrate a maturity beyond their years and Diego particularly does not have the emotional tools to cope. His retreat into an alternative world of pop-fandom and his intense obsession with the lyrics of his favourite band is perhaps not the most original response but it is highly relatable.

The main character remains unnamed throughout the novel. This is disconcerting in many ways as she is a sympathetic character and by the end of the book, we know her so well it is almost as if she might be a real acquaintance. There is a feminist reading to this, particularly as the brother she

cared for since they were both children does get the honour of a name. She represents the many thousands of women, often immigrants, who take on all the necessary but undesirable jobs—cleaning, caring for the elderly—as they strive to improve their lives and look after their families. These women are invisible and their struggles unappreciated; they may as well not have names.

Navarro's skill as a writer, the urgency and beauty of her prose make this novel shine and give it an intrinsic appeal. Although the novel deals with a very intimate story of one family's experience it takes on universal themes: inequality, poverty, trauma, and grief. I feel that the particular context of immigration and racism against the backdrop of Mexico and Spain lends the book additional interest and makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of anti-colonial literature. I of would recommend this book to any thoughtful reader and would love to see it translated into English.