

# Collective motherliness in Spain: Reception and Reformulation of Ellen Key's ideas (1907–1936)

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**Abstract:** During the early 1900s, Ellen Key's ideas about pedagogy, feminism and child rearing were influential around Europe. The same was true of Spain, although Key herself never visited the country. This article examines how Key's concept of collective motherliness was received and reformulated by Spanish intellectuals from two different generations: the first during the first two decades of the 20th century (1907-1920) and the second during the third and fourth decades (1920-1936). The focus is on works by two authors, each representing their generation of interpreters of Ellen Key: Carmen de Burgos (1867–1932) and Federica Montseny (1905–1994). The interpretation of these authors' texts in the light of Ellen Key's ideas of collective motherliness shows the reception and reformulation of these ideas in Spain changed between the two generations. The first focused more on collective values, such as women's education and patriarchal oppression in society, while the second generation focused more on individual aspects, such as free love and personal development.

**Keywords:** Ellen Key, Spain, Carmen de Burgos, Federica Montseny, Feminism

## 1. Introduction

During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ellen Key's maternal feminism made its way into Spain through a handful of Spanish progressive intellectuals who furthered her ideas on collective motherliness as a means of challenging catholic ideals of femininity. Although there is no record of the Swedish Ellen Key ever visiting Spain in person, her ideas fell into fertile ground among the Spanish pedagogical and sexual reform movements whose momentum coincided with the Spanish cultural Silver Age of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ellen Key's collective motherliness was a concept that referred to the centrality of women's capacities in the building of modern society. In her writing, Key described maternal love as the very basis for the collective motherliness, a social force grounded in the woman as both biological and spiritual being.<sup>1</sup>In Key's thinking, biological motherhood is not a prerequisite for acting out the collective motherliness. Instead, society should recognize the potential of motherliness in all women in order to ensure a better future for all humanity. There is also a eugenic component to Key's motherliness concept, in the sense that the upheaval of women's capability for loving and cultivating their maternal skills would have a

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<sup>1</sup> Key's concept of collective motherliness is a translation of the Swedish *samhällsmoderlighet* which is sometimes referred to as social motherliness in English.

positive influence on future generations. This view of maternal love – rooted in Nietzsche’s philosophy as well as in social eugenics – was the basis on which Key upheld the necessity of permitting women to choose their partner freely for the benefit of future humanity (Lindén 2002, 153–88; Ambjörnsson 2012, 306–11).

Key’s ideas of collective motherliness and its ethical implication for social development, laid the ground for the maternal feminism that evolved around Europe before the Second World War (Allen 2005, 32), and Spain was no exception in this regard. In Spain, Key’s two most influential works were *The Century of the Child* (1900) and *Love and Marriage* (1903), both translated into Spanish in 1907. Another important publication was *The Woman Movement* (1909) which was never translated into Spanish but still seems to have reached the anarchist and sexual reformist movements in Spain during the 1920’s and 1930’s, perhaps via its English translation from 1912.

In Spain, Key’s ideas on motherhood and female sexuality were reformulated in fiction mainly by two feminist authors belonging to different generations of intellectuals in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Spain. Firstly, Carmen de Burgos (1867–1932) whose Key-inspired narrative is set to the first generation of 1907–1920, and secondly Federica Montseny (1905–1994) who belonged to the anarchist circles of the second generation, 1920–1936. The identification of these two generations rests on Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretative communities as a way of understanding the reception and reformulation of texts as a collective production of meaning (Fish 1982, 13–17). Burgos’ and Montseny’s literary recreations of Key’s thoughts will thus be observed in a broader context of intellectuals who jointly furthered and developed her maternal feminist ideas in Spain.

Both Carmen de Burgos and Federica Montseny published a substantial number of serialised novellas depicting different problems related to maternity and love, but it was in their full-length novels where they developed their ideas in more depth. However, they centred their work on slightly different aspects of the collective motherliness concept. In what follows, I will offer readings of two works from each author, against the backdrop of Key’s maternal feminism. I will demonstrate how Carmen de Burgos - in the full-length novel *La rampa* (1917) - developed Key’s conception of society as a crippled body, where the female half is being paralysed by patriarchal oppression. I go on to show how she later - in the short novel *La Flor de la Playa* (1920) - explored Key’s proposal of a trial period for young people before marriage. Among Montseny’s works, I will focus on how she deepened into the concept of free love in *La victoria* (1925), and how she later developed a more eugenic view on maternal love in the follow-up, *El hijo de Clara* (1927).

## **2. The First Generation 1907–1920: Carmen de Burgos**

Carmen de Burgos was a journalist, a writer and a renowned women’s rights activist who also continued her work as a teacher throughout her whole career. She belonged to the first generation of Ellen Key readers and interpreters in Spain, rooted in the sphere of Spanish reform pedagogy during the period 1907–1920. The interpretative community consisted of Carmen de Burgos’ circles of colleagues and friends among progressive pedagogues. It was in this interpretative community that references were made to Key’s most successful work, *The Century of the Child*. These references began to appear in 1908, in the monthly bulletin of Spain’s most influential institution of pedagogical reform, Institución Libre de Enseñanza (1908a, 72; 1908b, 301; 1908c, 337).

The year before, in 1907, the first Spanish translations of Key's work had appeared in the Barcelona based series Biblioteca Sociológica Internacional, directed by Santiago Valentí Camp. He would, from then on, be a central figure in the furthering of Key's works in Spain up until his passing in 1934. *The Century of the Child* was translated into Spanish by Miguel Domengue Mir, and *Love and Marriage* was translated with the title *Amor y matrimonio* by Magdalena Santiago Fuentes who was Carmen de Burgos' intellectual collaborator and colleague at the Escuela Central Normal de Maestras in Madrid (Hibbs 2016).<sup>2</sup> Santiago Fuentes wrote a reflective prologue to *Amor y matrimonio* where she shared her thoughts on some of the matters treated by Key.<sup>3</sup>

The ideas on love and motherhood that reached the Spanish public through Santiago Fuente's translation of *Amor y matrimonio*, were seemingly controversial. Although her ideas were enthusiastically adopted by the feminists of the intellectual elite that are referred to here, the more mainstream and catholic strands of the women's movement in Spain were not enthusiastic about furthering Ellen Key's opinions on marriage and free love in their writings. An illustrious example of how shocking Key's view of love and marriage could be for a mainstream female readership is to be found in a chronicle in the fashion magazine *La última moda*. In two subsequent issues from 1910, fashion expert Blanca Valmont laments on what she interprets as Ellen Key's liberal view on love relations and on her morally devastating condemnation of traditional marriage (1910a, 1910b).

Apart from Valmont's critique in *La última moda*, the silence is striking regarding Ellen Key or indeed on any topic related to free love in mainstream and conservative publications from this period. For example, Key is never mentioned in more conservative feminist publications such as the magazine *La voz de la mujer*, whereas her name would repeatedly appear in progressive publications. That said, Key's controversial stances against traditional marriage were here being downplayed in favour of her ideas regarding women's obligations to family and child-rearing.

Among the more politically radical intellectuals, however, there was a more positive response to Key's ideas on collective motherliness and free love. Among the first to express her approval of Ellen Key's critique on marriage was Carmen de Burgos in her fixed column in the liberal newspaper *El Heraldo de Madrid* in December of 1907. Here, she reviews Santiago Fuentes' Spanish translation of Key's *Amor y matrimonio* together with Sibilla Aleramo's novel *Una donna* (Burgos 1907).<sup>4</sup> In Spain, Carmen de Burgos had already gained the nickname "la divorciadora" (the divorce lady) due to a query she had conducted in the press - in 1904 - regarding the indissolubility of marriage (Burgos 1904). This campaign earned her the reputation of being a radical feminist, despite all her intentions to appear as moderate in public (Núñez Rey 2005, 115–17).

In her review of *Amor y matrimonio*, Burgos reiterates the claim for a new marriage legislation, supporting her stance with Key's arguments on this matter. In March 1908, she published a second review of the same book. This time, however, she focused on childrearing and maternal love, avoiding the more controversial subject regarding women's sexuality or

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<sup>2</sup> Among other collaborations in between them, Burgos wrote a prologue to Santiago Fuentes' translation of a book by Roberto Bracco in 1906, and Santiago Fuentes published articles in the cultural journal *Revista Crítica*, directed by Carmen de Burgos.

<sup>3</sup> In 1911, *La España Moderna* published another Spanish edition of *Love and Marriage*, entitled *El amor y el matrimonio*, translated by Francisco Lombardía.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Ellen Key as the inspirational source in Sibilla Aleramo's novel, *Una donna*, see Ulla Åkerström's contribution on the matter in this issue.

freedom to love (Burgos 1908). About eight months later, her male colleague, the writer and journalist Manuel Bueno, wrote another acclamatory review of Key's ideas on women's freedom to love in a column in the same newspaper. In the article, he explicitly upholds the honour of so-called fallen women. He furthermore discards the piety shown by religious people regarding these women, sustaining a right for both men and women to freely unite under the divinity of love (Bueno 1908). This was an outspokenness regarding women's sexual liberation that could not be expected to be found in so explicit a manner among female writers in Spain during this period.

Carmen de Burgos published various novelettes depicting single motherhood and problems related to women's sexuality. In many of them, her foothold in the interpretative community around La Institución Libre de Enseñanza becomes evident in her portrayals of women's lack of education. In 1917, she published the full-length novel *La rampa* where she expanded on central issues of Key's maternal feminism, such as the suppression of collective motherliness in society and its consequences for the modern development of Spain. The novel begins with a dedication from the author to the unfortunate collective of disoriented women who had turned to her for help in her role as a newspaper columnist. In her dedication, Burgos points towards an understanding of the protagonist's destiny in the novel as representing a collective problem, rather than an individual one (Burgos 2006, 1). This collective address to Spanish women is then concerted through the main character, Isabel, a young woman who struggles to make a place for herself in urban Madrid as a woman and a mother. The urban environment is depicted as a domain populated by and shaped for men where women are referred to as restless shadows:

Era como si el mundo todo no fuese más que un feudo de los hombres, que sólo ellos le llenasen y tuviesen derecho a todo; las mujeres no aparecieran más que como sombras vagas, imprecisas, medrosas y siempre inquietadas (Burgos 2006, 8–9).

Part of Burgos' literary style was her use of consumer culture to portray the conditions faced by women in modern society. Ana Díaz Marcos explains how the author made fashion a part of her feminist project, and how her many handbooks for women on beauty and housekeeping also contained remarks on women's emancipation (Díaz Marcos 2009). Ideologically Burgos' advice on beauty and housekeeping for a very wide female audience harmonized with Ellen Key's ideas on aesthetics as being fundamental for women's social emancipation. According to Key, impractical and aesthetically unpleasant environment were unfit for women's necessities; as such, these were some of the elements that held women from developing to their full potential, especially among the less privileged social classes (Ivanov 2004, 64–67).

In *La rampa*, women's social underdevelopment is represented not only in a male-dominated society but also in the clothes the women wear. In a passage where Isabel and her friend Agueda try to make new dresses for themselves, the patriarchal suppression of femininity is depicted in the young women's incapacity for tailoring the dresses, and even in the sad heaviness of the fabric they use:

Fue un martirio el hacer los trajes. Aunque les ayudaba la tía de Agueda, de noche cuando iba a descansar, no acababan de salir bien. Tenían algo, un *no sé qué* imposible de dominar por completo. No les sentaban bien; la tela adquiría esa pesadez triste que no tiene en las manos de los grandes modistas. (Burgos 2006, 64 original italics)

The expression “no se qué” highlighted with italics in *La rampa* corresponds to an identically highlighted phrase in Santiago-Fuente's Spanish translation of Ellen Key's *Amor y Matrimonio*. Here, where Key expands on the lack of knowledge that holds back the development of women's maternal potential: “¿Será forzoso admitir en la naturaleza humana un *no sé qué* que impide la perfección y retarda el progreso?” (Key 1907a, 2:46 original italics) According to Key, education for women is the essential foundation in the building of a modern society, where humankind has so far been holding back the potential of maternal love by privileging men. In *La rampa*, this millennial female ignorance - in terms of maternity, beauty and social skills in general - has disastrous consequences for the young Isabel, whose baby, born out of wedlock, dies of malnutrition whereupon the novel ends with the protagonist standing destitute and completely alone with her suitcase in front of the public school for maids (Burgos 2006, 203–7). In the light of Key's maternal feminism, the motif of Isabel at the bottom of the social ramp becomes an illustration of the waste of maternal love, the fruitless efforts of a young woman and mother to make a place for herself in a society where she is not given any proper education.

Another take on education as part of an emancipatory project regarding sexuality appeared in the novelette *La Flor de la Playa* from 1920. Here, Burgos offered a literary interpretation of another idea that Ellen Key presented in *Amor y matrimonio*, namely the controversial trial period for young people where she suggested that they would be given the opportunity to enhance their relational skills by trying to live together before they decide upon marriage. According to Key, this trial period would give young couples an opportunity to practice marriage. If the match was not beneficial, it could just as well end in a friendly dissolution of the relationship (Key 1907b, 1:84–86). In this vein, Burgos portrayed a young couple in *La Flor de la Playa*, Elisa and Enrique, in the very situation that Key describes as typical for young people who are not yet ready for a permanent marriage; that is, they have not yet acquired the financial resources to establish a stable home, nor are they mature enough to engage in a permanent relationship. They are, as Key expressed it, confusing the wish for love with love itself (Key 1907b, 1:87).

Despite their low salaries that are insufficient for marriage, Elisa and Enrique manage to save money for a summer vacation. They decide to go to Portugal, a little resort named La Flor de la Playa, as they have heard that the country would be more liberal than Spain, “una nación más libre”, where they would pass as a married couple (Burgos 1989, 312). In Portugal at this time, contrary to Spain, divorce was legalized, a reform that Carmen de Burgos struggled for in her native country (Núñez Rey 2005, 115–26).

In this novelette, similarly to *La rampa*, Burgos made use of fashion and other merchandise for representing the dilemmas of modernity. Accordingly, in *La Flor de la Playa* the young couple's enthusiasm before going to Portugal is depicted in the new clothes they acquire for the journey. This enthusiasm is later contrasted with their experience in Portugal, where their discomfort in the fake marriage is portrayed in the uncomfortable beds in the primitive, little, rented room that mirrors the actual poverty of their pretend marriage, both materially and spiritually (Burgos 1989, 321–22). In contrast, the outside of the house and its surroundings are described as delightful with detailed descriptions of the young couple enjoying their vacation in the picturesque Portuguese resort.

After some time in Portugal, the young couple discovers that they are becoming bored in each other's company. The tediousness is not caused by the surroundings, but by themselves: “quizás por haber querido forzar demasiado la máquina de su sentimentalismo

para vivir tan solos, tan entregados a un amor que no había podido resistir aquella prueba” (Burgos 1989, 351). The vacation is here described explicitly as the pre-marriage test proposed by Key, a trial period before engaging in a steady relationship that the immature couple in Burgos’ novelette is unable to handle. On their return to Madrid by train, Elisa leaves a hat, which she had bought to act as a married lady, on the shelf. Amicably, the couple leave each other at the station, departing in two different coaches (Burgos 1989, 363). In Burgos’ novels, education becomes the centre of gravity for social change, where the suppression of women’s sexuality and their lack of means become a stumbling block for social development. As a contrast to *La rampa*, the portrayal in *La Flor de la Playa* of a young couple’s enabling of the trial period before marriage represents a possible future where young people take the lead in their own sexual education by disregarding traditional marriage conventions.

### 3. The Second Generation, 1920–1936: Federica Montseny

As director of the series that published the first Spanish translations of Ellen Key’s books, Santiago Valentí Camp was central to the interpretative community that upheld an interest in her work among progressive intellectuals linked to the pedagogical reform movement. Valentí Camp also played a central role in the continued interest in Key’s work in Spain, into the second period of our interest, 1920–1936. Valentí Camp continued to publish articles and books where he gave ample room to Ellen Key, well into the 1930’s (Valentí Camp 1918a, 1918b, 1933). For example, he dedicated a whole chapter of his *Reivindicaciones femeninas* to Ellen Key where he provides proof of a profound knowledge of her work (Valentí Camp 1927, 404–26). The prologue to Valentí Camp’s book, written by Regina Lamo, gives an insight in the interpretative community of the second generation, linked to the anarchist movement where both Lamo and Federica Montseny were active. Here, Key’s ideas of both childrearing and women’s sexuality had an impact. In Spain, Federica Montseny was one of the most outspoken anarchist politicians, who became minister of health during the Civil War (1936–1939), an office where she initiated reforms based on her ideas on sexual liberation, such as access to preservatives and labour rehabilitation for prostitutes (Montseny 1937, 26–27).

In the 1920’s both the feminist and the sexual reform movement grew notably in Spain, despite the censorship of the Primo de Rivera regime (Sinclair 2007, 5–7). Notwithstanding the hostile political climate of the 1920’s, the interwar period in Spain fostered a new generation of intellectuals who furthered and developed Key’s thoughts on motherhood and women’s sexuality. Seemingly, the main source of inspiration among Key’s texts had shifted from *Love and Marriage* to *The Woman Movement*, published in English in 1912, where the focus is more clearly set on individualism and free love. This shift becomes evident, for example, by studying the correspondence left by Hildegart Rodríguez, one of Spain’s most influential sex reformers of this period. In 1931, she tried to get in contact with Ellen Key five years after Key’s passing through Havelock Ellis, who had written the prologue to the English edition of *The Woman Movement* (Sinclair 2007, 165–67).<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez was only a teenager when corresponding with Ellis, a fact that might explain her

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Key’s notions of free love also continued to be a fundamental point of reference for the anarchist movement in Argentina, where her name appeared in publications concerned with sexual reform well into the 1950’s (Ledema Prietto 2014, 41; 83).

ignorance regarding Key's death, even though it had been front page news in Spain only five years earlier.

Even though Federica Montseny subscribed to many of the feminist postulates of her time, and as Nuria Cruz-Cámara points out, believed firmly in gender equality, she never claimed to be a feminist (Cruz-Cámara 2015, 34). On the contrary, she explicitly rejected it. As Roberta Johnson explains it, this aversion to the title was partly due to her role as a "double militant" of the political left wing, who would put the class struggle first (Johnson 2003). Moreover, this was a positioning that coincided with Montseny's eugenics-based view on women's development as both a collective and an individual process of improvement where she agreed with Key's difference-based view on gender. Just like Key and Burgos she took an interest in women's clothing and female aesthetics as linked to the social progression of women and maternity (Cruz-Cámara 2015, 42).

In Montseny's rejection of bourgeois feminism in favour of a view of the women's movement as a task for the whole of humankind, there is a resonance of the postulates made by Ellen Key in *The Woman Movement* from 1912. These may explain Key's popularity in anarchist circles. According to Key, women's freedom was not a mere question of obtaining the same rights as men but an issue for the whole of humanity that would form the woman of the future as a complete being, as if moulded into a work of art, both sexually and spiritually:

But nothing is more certain than that the feminine personality, whether her innermost desire be creative instinct, erotic happiness, maternal bliss, or universal human goodness, will acquire new forms of expression" (Key 1912, 56).

In tune with the notion of collective motherliness that Ellen Key had developed in her earlier work, women's strivings towards freedom, as expressed in *The Woman Movement*, was both a collective and individual endeavour, the importance of achieving "emancipation not only of *women in the mass*, but of *each individual woman*" (Key 1912, 68 original italics).

In *La Revista Blanca*, Federica Montseny reviewed Santiago Valentí Camp's book on feminism, *Revindicaciones femeninas* cited above, and was very critical about his understanding of Key's ideas on feminism. Seemingly, quite cognisant about the very quintessence of Key's thoughts on women's liberty in love, Montseny argues that by situating her among the feminist movement of his own time Valentí Camp ignores the humanist aspirations of Key, and her refusal to separate women's problems from the ones applicable to humanity at large. She does not mince matters when criticising what she judges to be a male, platonic and reductive view of women in Valentí Camp's interpretation of Key's ideas:

El profundo sentimiento de sus ideas y de sus sentimientos debía llevarla lejos de este horizonte reducido del feminismo, bandería de sexo en sus exaltaciones agresivas, culto platónico de la mujer en hombres que aun [sic] no la miran con la serena e igualitaria convicción de que es un ser fuerte y libre, con personalidad y vida propia. (Montseny 1928, 570)

Montseny's firm verdict to Valentí Camp's understanding of Ellen Key is an illustrating example of the difference in the reception of her ideas between the generations before and after 1920. The earlier generation's emphasis on collective motherliness and the role of women in both matrimony and society had now changed with a new generation of anarchists and sexual reformers who shifted focus to a more individualistic one, centred on issues of eugenics, human development and sexual liberty.

The development of femininity along these individualistic and eugenic lines explained in Montseny's review of Valentí Camp's *Revindicaciones femeninas*, was at the core of her novel *La victoria* from 1925. This was one of several novels and novelettes that Montseny published during the 1920's, but among these, *La victoria* was the one where she most profoundly set out to explore some of the ideals that she shared with Ellen Key in their eugenic view of love and motherhood. In the prologue to the edition of *La victoria* from 1930, Montseny explains the state of women's nature along the eugenic lines she shared with Key, as "naturaleza adquirida en siglos y siglos de dominio masculino y sumisión de la mujer" (Montseny 1930, 7).

*La victoria* is the first of two novels that feature the protagonist Clara, a young woman who searches for a man prepared to love her on equal terms, without any kind of submission on behalf of one of the partners to the other. The goal is equal individual liberty for both. Clara's search for love in the novel develops into a narrative exploration of the power relations between men and women in heterosexual relationships in a patriarchal society. The dialogue between the characters dominates the novel, representing different traditional attitudes related to heterosexual love where Clara is put in contrast to them all in her unconditioned defence of individual liberty and equality. Presented in social eugenic terms in the novel, this ideal is impossible to reach in current society, but as a potential for men and women of the future (Montseny 1930, 200–201).

In harmony with Key's Nietzsche-inspired, monist view of femininity, Clara also defends the right of a woman to be both body and soul, and to manifest her love openly. In this regard, Ellen Key describes women's economic dependency of men as one of the key factors behind the traditional ideal of female chastity:

Only when the duty of support on the part of the man ceases, will woman be able to demand the same chastity and fidelity from him as he demands from her; she will then be able, quite as proudly and naturally as he, to show the flowering of her being—her love—instead of as now increasing her demand in the marriage market by artful dissimulation. (Key 1912, 148–49)

In *La victoria*, a recurring theme in Clara's dialogues with men is the romantic idealisation that sets off womanliness as distant and divine, rather than corporeal and equal to manliness. One of Clara's interlocutors in the novel is Oswald, a romantic novelist. To him, she explains how men's control of earthly women's liberty becomes the consequence of such romantic idealization of women that inhibits them from developing into complete beings, both spiritually and sexually. In her conversation with Oswald, Clara points at how chivalrous protection of women as idealized objects of veneration, deprives women of their dignity as humans, by denying them both their rights and their obligations to society (Montseny 1930, 124–26). Clara's strivings towards emancipation coincide with Key's projection of the "woman of the future" as one who "will be freed from sexual hypertrophy, freed to *complete humanity*" (Key 1912, 218 original italics).

Maternity as a spiritual as well as a corporeal potential for social enhancement is another theme, that is just briefly touched upon in *La victoria*, but returns more strongly in the follow-up, *El hijo de Clara* from 1927. The Nietzschean view that Montseny shared with Key, of maternity as a duty of humanity towards the future, resonates in Clara's intention in the novel to "crear un hijo que será mi obra: una avanzada del hombre del porvenir" (Montseny 1927, 10). In Montseny's representation of Clara's son, Nardo, as her own work of



art lies a resonance of Key's notion of motherhood as a plastic skill that can be enhanced through education (Key 1912, 170–93).

Similarly to Carmen de Burgos' depiction of Isabel's poorly prepared motherhood in *La rampa*, Montseny in *El hijo de Clara* forwarded a view of women's reproductive capacities as a plastic feminine potential. Instead of mere instinct, motherhood is upheld as a social potential, prone to be cultivated for the sake of future humanity. Clara focuses her motherly skills on the education of her son with the aim of creating the man of the future: the man Clara failed to find for herself in the first novel, *La victoria*. However, Clara's son Nardo also fails to find a suitable partner, just like his mother, since there is no woman to be found who is prepared to love him while still maintaining full individual liberty (Montseny 1927, 239–45). This open-ended finale representing Clara's and Nardo's frustrated life-journeys in Montseny's novels is similar to the ones Carmen de Burgos created in her novels. They all represent a wanting or crippled society that suppresses half of humanity and thereby inhibits humankind from developing fully through love.

#### 4. Conclusion

By interpreting Carmen de Burgos' and Federica Montseny's novels in the light of Key's notions of collective motherliness and maternal love, different aspects of these concepts emerge as related to the interpretative communities where the authors worked. Carmen de Burgos' novels focus mainly on motherhood and love as a collective social problem, where the lack of education, traditional marriage customs and patriarchal oppression of women is at the heart of her social critique in the novels. Montseny for her part belongs to a more individualistic strand of thought, related to the anarchist and sexual reform movements of the 1920's and 1930's. Even though her novels contain feminist stances similar to the ones found in Burgos' works, they explore these issues in a more individualistic manner, focusing on individual liberty and personal development.

Despite the differences between generations that Burgos and Montseny represent, they share an important feature in their openness towards the future. Just like Ellen Key, they both render the shortcomings of present society regarding the way patriarchal society suppresses motherhood and women's sexuality. However, they also share her openness towards a future where humanity may act as a complete body, where both the male and female half contribute and partake equally in the functioning of its members.

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