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*FURIA*

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# Negotiating Gender and *Fútbol* Matters in Yamile Saied Méndez's *Furia* Juanita Heredia<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersection of gender and *fútbol* (soccer) as a process of negotiation that shifts from dependency to agency in the context of the *Ni una menos* movement in twenty-first century Argentina, in U.S. Argentine Yamile Saied Méndez's first young adult novel, *Furia* (2020). As part of a generation of transnational U.S. Latina authors of South American descent, Saied Méndez focuses on the challenges and rewards of an aspiring female adolescent *fútbol* player in Rosario, Argentina, who must confront domestic abuse and gender inequality in this male-dominated sport. By drawing attention to the protagonist's multi-ethnic genealogy, Saied Méndez also intervenes in the revision of the national narrative of belonging in Argentine *fútbol* based on gender and heritage. She claims that the daughters as much as the sons of immigrants have a right to play *fútbol* if their talents permit. Saied Méndez further recovers a history of violence against women and young girls at home and in public to foreground the importance of women's activism and consciousness to bring social justice for the victims and the survivors. Despite the social obstacles based on gender discrimination at the personal and institutional levels for young female *fútbol* players in South America, Saied Méndez maintains that achieving one's goals and dreams of freedom to continue their college education and play professional *fútbol* are possible beyond national boundaries with community support, female role models, and the memory of one's female ancestors who sacrificed for future generations.<sup>2</sup>

KEY WORDS: South American/Argentine diaspora, gender, soccer (*fútbol*), social justice, novel

## RESUMEN

El siguiente artículo examina la intersección de género y fútbol como un proceso de negociación en la búsqueda de independencia en el contexto del movimiento *Ni Una Menos* en la novela juvenil, *Furia* (2020), por la autora argentina estadounidense Yamile Saied Méndez. Como parte de la generación de escritoras latinas estadounidenses de descendencia sudamericana, Saied Méndez se enfoca en los desafíos y los logros de una futbolera adolescente que debe enfrentar el abuso doméstico y la desigualdad de género en este deporte masculino en Rosario, Argentina. Al llamar la atención a la genealogía multiétnica de la protagonista, Saied Méndez interviene en revisar la narrativa nacional de pertenecer en el fútbol argentino basado en género y herencia. Ella mantiene que las hijas como los hijos de los inmigrantes tienen el derecho de jugar fútbol si su talento les permite. Además, Saied Méndez recupera una historia de violencia en contra de mujeres y jóvenes en casa y en público para darle importancia al activismo de mujeres para despertar conciencia sobre la justicia social de las víctimas y de las sobrevivientes. A pesar de los obstáculos sociales basados en la discriminación de género al nivel personal y al institucional en contra de las futboleras jóvenes en Sudamérica, Saied Méndez mantiene que lograr las metas y los sueños de la libertad de continuar la educación universitaria y jugar fútbol profesionalmente son posibles más allá de los límites nacionales con el apoyo de la comunidad, modelos de conducta femeninos y la memoria de los antepasados femeninos que se sacrificaron por generaciones futuras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sur América/Diáspora Argentina, género, fútbol, justicia social, novela

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In the young adult novel *Furia* (2020), U.S. Argentine author Yamile Saied Méndez presents a mesmerizing transnational narrative of a female adolescent coming of age while grappling with women's *fútbol* (soccer) and domestic violence in Rosario, Argentina, in the twenty-first century. Although this story references many icons of Argentine *fútbol* history, including Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi, the focus on gender and *fútbol* matters takes center stage. The protagonist Camila Hassan is a young promising captain of her *fútbol* team who strives to play abroad professionally, namely the U.S., where opportunities exist for female players that are not available in her native Argentina. Amidst her dreams and desires, one finds her trapped in a home where women's bodies and minds are controlled by the patriarchal domination of male members in the family. For the longest time, the mother holds an ambiguous position regarding her daughter's search for freedom and goals because of her own thwarted dreams from her adolescence, thereby exemplifying her upholding of the status quo. Scholars have noted that "According to gender role theory [O'Neil, 1981], men who hold strong beliefs in masculine gender norms, particularly with regard to providing for one's family, may be more likely to perpetrate violence if they feel these norms are being violated" (Kwesiga et al. 315). The monitoring of women's desires and ambition in this particular home takes place against the larger backdrop of brutal crimes committed against Argentine women and girls such as murder and rape. Set in the context of the *Ni una menos* movement (reminiscent of the *MeToo* movement in the U.S.), Saied Méndez connects the private and public spheres of women's lives to demonstrate that liberation of mind and body must begin at home, a microcosm of patriarchal values reflected in society at large (43). In this article, I argue that women and young girls must constantly negotiate gender roles as they shift from dependency to agency at home, and in *fútbol* matters in *Furia*.

Before delving into the analysis of *Furia*, I locate Yamile Saied Méndez as a U.S. Latina author of Argentine origins in the twenty-first century. Born and raised in Rosario, Argentina, until a teenager, she immigrated to the United States as a young woman to begin her university education. In addition to becoming a children and young adult fiction author, she is an avid fan of *fútbol* and knows its history, as she displays brilliantly in *Furia*. This novel earned a 2021 Pura Belpré Young

Adult Author Medal as well as a Reese Witherspoon and Hello Sunshine Young Adult Author Pick. In *Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States* (2018), Heredia chronicles a literary tradition through interviews with twelve authors of South American origins, including the Argentine diaspora. She demonstrates how their contributions to U.S. literature in English open doors to their heritage in South America and diversify the U.S. Latina/o experience in a transnational framework. According to Heredia, these authors have not only immigrated to the U.S. to develop intellectually, socially, and politically, but they have often returned to their countries of origin through travels and writings to seek social justice for many unexplained historical events, including dictatorships and gender inequality. Saied Méndez's *Furia* is part of this South American Latina/o literary tradition. Moreover, she brings a fresh perspective in this novel as she intervenes in the male-dominated sports discourse of *fútbol* and recovers women's participation through changing gender roles in the twenty-first century.

### **Historical Context: Immigration and Heritage**

In *Furia*, Saied Méndez purposefully inserts different kinds of immigrations to disrupt the national narrative of immigrants coming mainly from Spain, Italy, and Eastern Europe; who arrived in Argentina in large waves from the 1880s through the 1930s. In the past centuries, these immigrants helped modernize Argentina, especially the cities, as they contributed to education, politics, culture (i.e., tango) and *fútbol*. Saied Méndez points out that because of globalization in the twenty-first century, Argentina is changing rapidly from a nation of predominantly European descendants to one of world immigrations from the Middle East and Asia, as is evident in the characters of Camila Hassan (Arab) and Roxana Fong (Chinese), respectively. In the context of *fútbol*, it is not only the sons of immigrants but also the daughters of immigrants that are changing the face of *fútbol*. This transformation of the game is even more remarkable given the expectations of gender roles in their families, and the tenacity it will take to break those traditions that affect women negatively.

As Saied Méndez reconfigures the national narrative of Argentina in *Furia*, she incorporates the ethnic heritages of the main characters. For example, Camila Hassan explores her multi-ethnic

genealogy by showing that global migrations contributed to her current identity as an *argentina* of Arab heritage. By mentioning Ahmed, her Palestinian grandfather, and Elena, her Andalusian grandmother, Saied Méndez memorializes her Arab ancestors who immigrated to Argentina to begin a new life and seek opportunities not afforded to them in their home countries. Hyland's *More Argentine Than You*, chronicles the arrival of Arabic-speaking immigrants of various nationalities (i.e., Syrian, Lebanese), and religions (i.e., Christians, Jews, Muslims) that had reached a substantial community by the 1920s in Argentina. Although Saied Méndez mentions different national/regional backgrounds, Palestinian and Andalusian, it is still important to see how these immigrants negotiated their Arab heritage and belonging in Argentina, a predominantly European immigrant nation.

At the same time, Camila is aware of the challenges for Arab descendants in the U.S. When she enters the U.S. at the invitation of a U.S. soccer coach to play professionally, she must pass through customs at the airport. An immigration officer stalls her when he notices her Arab last name, Hassan, in her passport but lets her pass customs because she has legal papers allowing her to enter the U.S. This example subtly refers to the discrimination against Arab immigrants and their descendants after 9/11. In a transnational framework, Saied Méndez demonstrates how globalization can influence perceptions of ethnic groups at the personal, local, and institutional levels through racial profiling in the U.S. Saylor observes, "Much work has yet to be done to recover lost works by women writers in the Arab diaspora and to piece together the unfinished tapestry of transnational feminist genealogy of Arab women writers" (303). Saied Méndez also forms part of this literary tradition as she compares the reception of Arab descendants (diasporas) in the U.S. and Argentina to note that racism exists in both contexts but in different ways. In the U.S. ethnic boundaries are explicitly marked but in Argentina ethnic groups can be part of the national fabric through assimilation.

In terms of popular culture, *Furia* takes its cue and dialogues with the well-received *fútbol* film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), where the protagonist Jess, an adolescent daughter of Indian immigrants in London, also faces challenges in choosing to play *fútbol* due to her cultural traditions and gender restrictions. Even though *fútbol* originated in England in the 19th century, the national

representation of its players has diversified tremendously in contemporary times. Like *Furia*, *Bend It Like Beckham* rewrites the national script of belonging for children of Indian immigrants in the new host country, England. When India received its political independence from Great Britain after World War II, people from the former colonies, like the protagonist's family in *Bend It Like Beckham*, were able to travel and seek opportunities in England. As a first-generation Indian descent female who must negotiate Indian and English values, Jess resembles Camila in *Furia* because both must endure gender expectations and limitations placed upon them. Instead, they seek to become professional *fútbol* players in the U.S. by impressing U.S. scouts. Like Jess, Camila must hide her *fútbol* practices from her parents for fear of punishment, misunderstanding, and prohibition from partaking in future games. Furthermore, the father in *Bend It Like Beckham* experiences ethnic discrimination in sports because the family is Sikh Indian and therefore, not allowed to play in the cricket clubs of England. The roles of the mothers in both narratives also compare in how they wish to prepare their daughters to be dutiful wives, not realizing that the young women wish to break the tradition of domesticity by playing *fútbol* in the public sphere. Both, *Furia* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, exemplify two pioneer texts that engage the struggles of the daughters of immigrants who strive to participate in their countries' national sport professionally as they confront multiple obstacles of gender inequality to overcome biases at home as well as on the field.

### **Gender and Fútbol**

According to *fútbol* scholar Joshua Nadel, "Argentina was the first nation in Latin America to play soccer" and "The immigrants and particularly their children, rapidly took to soccer. In turn, the sport became a way to incorporate immigrants into the nation" (In *Fútbol!*, 50, 52). It is no small coincidence that playing *fútbol* has continued for different generations of immigrants and women in contemporary Argentina. In *Furia*, Saied Méndez offers a counter-narrative to the official history of *fútbol*, often written by men with an authoritarian perspective. At the intersection of gender and *fútbol*, she combines Camila's desire to play *fútbol* with her social justice consciousness as a woman player who seeks rights for women in this male-dominated sport.<sup>1</sup> After a *fútbol* match, a reporter

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<sup>1</sup> Also, see Elsey and Nadel, especially the introduction and chapter 1, for pivotal moments in women's *fútbol* and sports history in Argentina and Chile.

asks Camila if winning a game means progress in women's rights (19). Camila insists that everything they have achieved in *fútbol* is because they have earned it through hard work and discipline. She says, "We'd made the space. We'd filled in the cracks of the system and made room for ourselves where there was none. No one had given us anything. We had taken it. But no one wanted to hear the truth" (22). Camila is fully aware that young female *fútbol* players or futboleras like herself in Rosario have had to work twice as hard as their male counterparts and carve a space for themselves because no one has given them any opportunities. Through their efforts, they have had to make inroads. Camila is also cognizant of the fact that she is a pioneer *fútbol* player in her matriarchal lineage. Knowing quite well that she comes from a long line of women who have not had similar opportunities, she says, "I smiled and ran to the field to sing the wordless song of the captive women who roared in my blood. My ancestresses had been waiting to sing for generations" (169). By continuing the struggle of her female ancestors, Camila is literally and metaphorically breaking down barriers by playing *fútbol* and advancing the cause for young women in her family, and at a national level as well. As small a triumph as it may seem, Camila knows that the obstacles to achieve equity for women continue even in contemporary times. In "The Antinational Game?" Nadel documents the history of women's participation in *fútbol* dating back to the mid-1800s, even though there were no formal clubs organized until the 1970s. He insists that "Perhaps nowhere have women fought for their right to play soccer as hard for as long as in Latin America. Women have played in the region for over 100 years despite legal bans and social scorn" (45).

In terms of *fútbol* history in Latin America, particularly in South America, Saied Méndez clearly outlines key players who have been adored and appropriated by fans globally in *Furia*. When the protagonist Camila is called a "Maradonita" by her brother Pablo, "a female Neymar" by her coach's sister Gaby or "a female Messi, a Dybala" by her boyfriend Diego, these labels are both an homage and a renewal of how young women are changing the physical and gender landscape of *fútbol* (175, 190). In *Fútbol!* Nadel locates Maradona, Messi (nicknamed La Pulga and a Rosario native), and Neymar as legendary national and global players in the national histories of Argentina, Brazil, and beyond (48-49, 58-59, 78). Villoro explores the impact of famous icons like

Diego Maradona on Latin American culture and particularly, on Argentine fútbol, where he earned the nickname, “The Hand of God.” Heredia further claims that Maradona has crossed national boundaries to remain a hero for many South American diasporas in the U.S. Yet, Camila insists on taking her role models from famous female icons in fútbol like the U.S. player Alex Morgan and the Brazilian-Swedish Marta Vieira da Silva because the playing field is more equal than the comparison with men.<sup>2</sup> Saied Méndez reminds us that women players should be as visible as their male counterparts and serve as role models in the international narrative of fútbol in the contemporary period.

While *Furia* may be marketed as a young adult novel, Saied Méndez does not shy away from critical topics such as the violence against women and gender inequality at home, as well as in sports, particularly for young adolescent girls in *Furia*. For example, she underlines the gender difference in the treatment of the siblings, Camila, and her brother Pablo, when it comes to the right to play fútbol. Pablo is expected to reach the professional level by playing for a European team to exhibit family pride and, more importantly, to assist his working-class family financially. Although Camila may have similar goals, she is not expected to play neither professionally nor develop an interest in the sport as a hobby. On the contrary, exhibiting any kind of passion for fútbol can be perceived negatively for her. Camila remembers clearly how her father labeled her as “marimacho” when she was playing fútbol with her brother and fellow male friends as a twelve-year old. The term “marimacho” which connotes tomboy or butch woman was meant to insult her womanhood and warn her (5). The father not only offended his daughter in public, but he also exerted his authority in prohibiting her interest in fútbol. This kind of bullying or verbal abuse originating at home and at a young age is indicative of the control that fathers wish to have over their daughters’ minds, bodies, and activities. The mother Isabel also reminds Camila that a “decent girl” should not be caught at a fútbol stadium, implying that young girls represent the family honor with their behavior in public (3). By espousing the double standard in the family context, scholars claim that “Gender stereotypic thinking may limit children’s choices, interests, and abilities” (Trepanier and Romatowski 155).

Consequently, Camila must live a double life by performing the role of the obedient daughter at

<sup>2</sup> Marta Vieira da Silva holds the record for most goals at 109, even in comparison with men, in Brazilian International Fútbol.



home, but she must also keep a secret, her hidden identity as a strong and independent fútbol player on the field. By doing so, she is released from the constraints of her father's incessant desire to control her. Camila takes on this risky dual identity for fear of punishment in the form of domestic abuse (verbal and physical). She realizes that her parents may not change, but she must take a chance and follow her passion or fury exemplified in the nickname, "Furia."

Since Camila has a difficult time navigating her freedom under her father's domineering reign at home, she realizes that her mother Isabel and her fútbol coach Alicia represent the two most important women as role models from whom to learn, as she transforms from an adolescent to an independent woman. In the relationship with her mother, Camila eventually finds an ally who evolves from depending on her father to an independent business entrepreneur. Even though Isabel tries to protect Camila's body and thus, her sexuality, she does not wish her daughter to become pregnant at age seventeen like every other woman in the family. This fate would end Camila's plans as a professional, such as a doctor, which reflects the mother's dream and breaks the cycle of dependence that her female ancestors have experienced. Hence, the mother sacrifices herself working as a seamstress in a factory to encourage Camila to earn good grades to enter a decent medical school which will enable her to become financially independent and not rely on a man for support as Isabel had on Camila's father, Andrés.

By destabilizing gender role expectations, Saied Méndez sets up the novel where gender boundaries are not so clearly defined and furthermore, contested. For instance, the mother Isabel remembers worrying about Camila when she was little because she preferred to play fútbol with her dog Nico rather than with her doll, two symbols that represent distinctive gender roles. In fact, Isabel cried when she discovered her daughter's interest in fútbol at a young age because it reminded her of her own interest in fútbol. Isabel's father, Camila's maternal grandfather, prohibited her from playing fútbol as a youngster. Similar to Andrés's control over Camila, he critiqued her and warned that she could be mistaken for a lesbian. This identity was frowned upon in their social circles and would cause a great stigma to family honor (230-231).<sup>3</sup> Camila also emphasizes the

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<sup>3</sup> In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess and her best friend Jules, also a female fútbol player, are accused of being lesbians because a family friend saw them hugging in public, mistaking that intimate gesture for a lesbian relationship. The judgement and stigma attached to these public expressions speak more to the perception and reception of camaraderie among female athletes.

discrepancy between the theory (law) and practice (beliefs and customs) of accepting different sexual orientations in contemporary Argentina. She says, “Our country had legalized same-sex marriage way before the U.S., but prejudice didn’t read or obey laws. It was a hard weed to pull from people’s hearts” (210). This experience in Isabel’s youth also represents the beginning of limiting her freedom in sports. Isabel’s childhood friend Héctor informs Camila that she reminds him of Isabel when she was young because of the passion and fury she used to have before gender restrictions were placed upon her.

To understand the motives behind the mother Isabel’s behavior and impact on Camila, one needs to examine the relationship between her and her husband Andrés. Camila’s parents married quite young because Isabel became pregnant at age seventeen and was unable to finish high school. Hence, Isabel becomes overly protective of her only daughter Camila who is not only an exemplary fútbol player but also a bright student. In a heart-to-heart talk with her daughter regarding the emotional component of the relationship with her father, the mother reveals that it is a marriage of necessity rather than reciprocated love and mutual respect. They had to marry and work to survive and support their two children, Pablo and Camila. Thus, the parents’ own dreams were shattered, and they had to defer them to their children. This explains Andrés’ pressure on Pablo to be an outstanding fútbol player at an international level, especially when the father claims that he is better than Diego, Camila’s boyfriend, who may end up playing for Barcelona or Manchester United. Since Camila is a girl, Andrés would like to pawn her off to Diego, already an international fútbol icon compared to Maradona, so that the family can benefit from his financial gains. This scene is reminiscent of the colonial period when the Indigenous translator Doña Marina/Malinche was sold and sacrificed to the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortés, to benefit her family but who later viewed as a traitor to her culture for the fall of the Aztec Empire (Alarcón 68). Unlike this historical figure, Camila refuses to view herself as an object of exchange in her family. When Camila realizes her father’s intentions, she disagrees vehemently with his plans. She says, “In my family, love had always been a weapon to be used against the weakest at their most vulnerable. I wouldn’t let my parents use it against Diego” (196). Evidently, Camila belongs to a different generation from that of

her parents and thus, can take a stand regarding her freedom and self-respect. She further asserts, “I’d leave this house the first chance I got, but not by chasing after a boy, including my brother. I’d do it on my own terms, following my own dreams, not someone else’s. And most importantly, no one would leech off my sacrifices. No one” (34). Unlike her mother and other female ancestors who depended on men, Camila has more choices thanks to her education and the opportunities that she has gained by networking with her fútbol coach, Alicia. Furthermore, she breaks the cycle of dependency by achieving her own goals and not relying on a man.

When Saied Méndez presents the character of coach Alicia in the lives of the young female fútbol players like Camila, she introduces an alternative female role model. Scholars have noted that “It is critical then that teachers, caregivers, and other school personnel develop programs and utilize curricular activities that will encourage a more gender equitable view of the world” (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 157). Alicia represents this role. She first notices Camila and her best friend Roxana Fong playing fútbol clandestinely at a park at night. Impressed with the talented young women, she instantly invites them to join her female fútbol league in Rosario. Coach Alicia further claims that Camila has more talent in fútbol than her much supported brother Pablo and will go further in her fútbol career (17). Even her father, Andrés, reminds Pablo that talent is not enough to excel in fútbol if he does not practice consistently and develop discipline for the game. Coach Alicia advises Camila that she should give herself more credit in fútbol by encouraging her to be more active and assertive in the role of player in the game rather than just a passive spectator or admirer of her superstar boyfriend, Diego. This assessment by the female coach makes Camila realize that she can make a career for herself rather than witness another person’s career in the sport (46). It gives her a sense of agency. Camila must also think seriously about her own goals as a professional player in the future. The coach not only gives her players hope but she looks out for their future welfare so that they can make it to the Sudamericano tournament where her sister Gaby will appear as a U.S. scout looking for talent from young futboleras in the major cities of Argentina to recruit for the National Women’s Soccer team at the college level in the U.S.

At different moments in the novel, Saied Méndez refers to the need for women “to break the cycle” of dependence and victimization as much at home as in public. In Camila’s generation she and her peers like Roxana Fong have already begun to play women’s fútbol at the regional level in Rosario, Argentina, under the guidance and mentorship of Alicia, who expects the female players to have fun as well as play with discipline. As she develops physically and emotionally, Camila does not witness a weak, obedient, and dependent woman in Alicia, but one who knows how to organize, inspire, and teach young girls how to think on their feet and remember that they are part of a community. Alicia says, “. . . fútbol is life, but so is love, and so is family. My intent in coaching the team was never to create fútbol-playing machines. I know how much all of you sacrifice to play” (281). She treats her female players with respect by being understanding as well as taking care of their health when they are injured. The combination of discipline and genuine concern motivates her players. As team captain, Camila has also gained the respect of her fellow teammates.

### **New Generation of Players**

In the younger generation, Camila, her brother Pablo, and her boyfriend Diego Ferrari, represent a new consciousness of what it means to play fútbol as it intersects with gender in the twenty-first century. Both Pablo and Diego know and support Camila’s fútbol participation and practices on the field to a certain extent by keeping her secret from her parents. Camila points out to Diego that if she makes it to the trials for the National Women’s Soccer League in the U.S., she will need to finance this goal by earning her own money rather than rely on her parents who prefer to support her brother as a professional player.<sup>4</sup> This requires Camila to step out of her family’s comfort zone because she recognizes the double-standard of discrimination based on gender inequality.

As Camila and Diego rekindle their romance from their earlier years, she seeks comfort in her boyfriend to combat the lack of support from her parents. In developing the romantic relationship between Camila Hassan and Diego Ferrari, Saied Méndez alludes to the meeting between descendants of new and old immigrants, respectively, in the national construction and

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<sup>4</sup> While women players have been encouraged to play *fútbol* and their teams have grown worldwide, it is often the men who are rewarded better financially. See Elsey’s “Breaking the Machine” and Elsey and Nadel’s *Futbolera* for background on the lack of equity in financial compensation for *fútbol* players based on their gender in Latin America.

reformulation of Argentine identity and its diaspora given that Camila eventually ends up in the U.S. Diego Ferrari of Italian heritage only knew his mother before she left him at the age of eight in an orphanage at the church El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in Rosario. As a youngster, he developed a passion for fútbol and was spotted by an Italian scout. Diego's fútbol talents take him to the renowned Juventus team in Turín, Italy, where he meets international icons like Argentine Paulo Dybala, who reminds him not forget his roots in Rosario, especially since he began in the stadium where Camila practices currently. Even though Diego has achieved fame and fortune, he is not completely happy. He can neither find his mother nor does she seek him. Diego reveals to Camila his feelings of *saudade*, homesickness, for Rosario when he is away in Italy. He had learned of this concept and emotion expressed in Portuguese from his Brazilian roommate Luís Felipe who expressed *saudade* for his Rio de Janeiro home. Camila explains that her form of *saudade* has more to do with a desire for freedom and being accepted as a fútbol player which the male players take for granted. She says, "My *saudade* had more to do with not getting to experience what he had: a life playing fútbol without having to hide" (88). Incidentally, Saied Méndez gives Camila's boyfriend the name of Diego, an homage to the legendary fútbol player Diego Maradona who brought Argentina to winning the World Cup in 1986 and then, became team captain of the national team in the post-2000 period.<sup>5</sup>

When Diego Ferrari travels to Rosario for a brief visit before returning to his team Juventus in Turín for the season, he views one of Camila's fútbol games by accident at his old stadium and recognizes her talent for the first time. Upon seeing his presence, female players on both sides of the spectrum bombard El Titán Diego for autographs. Little does he realize that Camila has also made a name for herself in her fútbol community as "La Furia," also the title of the novel, a nickname bestowed upon her by Roxana's immigrant Chinese mother, Mrs. Fong, because she exhibits much passion and "fury" on the field. Rather than a passive observer, Mrs. Fong embodies a feminist figure because she encourages Roxana and Camila to follow their dreams in playing fútbol and supports Camila by not telling her family. However, Diego prefers to think of Camila as a "warrior" and compares her to the warrior princess Camila who fought on the losing side of the Trojan War in

5 See Burns for a historical biography of Diego Maradona.

Virgil's *Aeneid* (75). Even though the odds may be against Camila, she is named appropriately as she will not go down without a struggle or a fight on the field, or in her life.

In many respects, Diego and Camila are a match made in fútbol heaven. He understands her passion and “fury” for the game and they both come from similar disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds in Rosario, a city known for producing outstanding fútbol players at an international level. Thus, Diego decides to help Camila find her first job as an English tutor at El Buen Pastor by speaking on her behalf to Father Hugo who knew him as a child. An Indian immigrant, Hugo makes Rosario his home having lived there over half of his life. To her credit, Camila is a brilliant student because she has aced her TOEFL and SAT exams demonstrating that she has gained a strong command of English, opening doors for her beyond Argentina. Camila is not only a talented fútbol player and team captain, but she also has brains, two key ingredients that will make her a strong candidate to make the National Women's Soccer team in the U.S. Knowing English empowers Camila to land this job to earn extra income to achieve her dreams and depend less on her parents. Saied Méndez maintains that Camila can use her intellectual capacity to achieve agency should the physical demands of fútbol not work out.

El Buen Pastor holds symbolic value for women in *Furia* as it evolved from a space of enclosure to one of community. Saied Méndez insinuates how much women have progressed in Argentina's history in a century through great sacrifice. Camila reflects on how women have moved from a confined domestic space to one of relative freedom with more options in this church. She says,

I thought of the girls imprisoned here for fighting for the right to vote, or demanding not to be beaten by their fathers or husbands, or for wanting to earn a decent salary. Las Incorregibles. These walls had witnessed so much pain and despair, and I wondered if the ghosts of those girls still haunted them. Eighteen ninety-six was so long ago, but so many things remained the same. (91)

Camila realizes that this church served as a prison and form of punishment for women who wished to fight for their civil rights in politics, employment, and at home. By taking on the name of “Las

Incorregibles,” they proved that they could not be reformed nor contained because they transgressed social boundaries. A century later, El Buen Pastor is a community center that educates and helps all children, male and female, achieve safety and strive for goals in their lives that will make them productive citizens as opposed to criminals or victims of crimes. At the same time, Camila knows that progress for women is qualified as she must confront limitations placed upon her at home because she was born female. Saied Méndez insists that change must begin at home and radiate to the public sphere. Barrancos chronicles women’s activism from the home to the streets in the public sphere in Argentina by exemplifying the marches of mothers and grandmothers at the Plaza de Mayo who mourned the disappearances and/or murders of their children and grandchildren during Argentina’s Dirty War (1976-1983). These demonstrations continue in the present moment. I contend that Camila and her friends continue this feminist activist legacy by holding vigils and marches in memory of their murdered and raped female friends. This is how women remake history from the home to the plaza/public.

While Camila may not earn as much as she wishes at El Buen Pastor, she gains other valuable experiences by interacting with the youth that she teaches, especially younger girls who need mentors for guidance. For instance, the twelve-year old female student Karen is instrumental for Camila’s growth because she reminds Camila of her younger self. Karen also knows some English and attempts to translate literary authors such as Chilean Gabriela Mistral despite some social and personal setbacks like her stuttering. In fact, Karen suffers from bullying, in the form of verbal abuse, from her peers because when she pronounces her name “Karen,” she stutters at the Ka at least, twice which results in the pronunciation of the pejorative word, “caca.” In turn, this is the nickname that her peers call her and contributes to her loneliness and ostracization from her social circle. Camila ignores the internal fights among the kids and prefers to devote her attention to Karen by sharing an interest in reading Argentine Alma Maritano’s *Un globo de luz anda suelto*, a children’s book that inspires freedom and creativity to dissuade her from reading the sad poetry of Argentine Alfonsina Storni.<sup>6</sup> By paying attention to Karen’s intellectual and creative development, Camila is

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<sup>6</sup> While Mistral and Storni represent among the best Latin American vanguard poets (1910s-1930s), their lives do not follow the conventional paths of women. Storni, a single mother, attempted suicide. Mistral never married and later, was discovered to be a lesbian.

modeling support and helping build her self-confidence; very similar to Coach Alicia's support of her, a chosen matrilineage.

### **From Domestic Abuse to Violence Against Women**

In *Furia*, Saied Méndez refrains from solely glorifying the triumphs of *futboleras*. She delves into the pain and trauma of violence that haunts young girls at home to uncover brutal acts committed against women. Camila must overcome verbal and physical abuse at home. Camila's father Andrés lives his life with regret. According to his wife Isabel, he was a stellar and handsome fútbol player who could have had any young female teenager he desired. After becoming involved with Isabel, she became pregnant with her son Pablo. To fulfill his paternal responsibilities, Andrés married her, not realizing that his dreams of becoming a successful fútbol player and leave behind his working-class roots in Rosario came to an end. Instead, he becomes a factory worker and never achieves anything he had planned as a promising fútbol player. Unfortunately, Andrés blames his wife and his children for his unfulfilled dreams. He exploits his wife's economic dependency in terms of her labor as a seamstress in a factory and her obedient role as wife and mother. What worsens matters is that he uses violence to instill fear in his family members, especially the women, to be able to control all in his household. Despite the inroads that women have made in Argentina, Barrancos said, "Pero tampoco era el hogar un lugar seguro para las mujeres ya que la violencia doméstica ha sido y sigue siendo la más ejercitada de las fórmulas que se imponían en la esfera íntima" (108). When Isabel takes Camila to see Dr. Facundo after a fútbol injury, he automatically refers them for counseling support because he suspects that they have a domestic abuse situation at home (267-268).

Patriarchal domination comes to a halt in the climactic encounter between Andrés and the three members of his family, Camila, Pablo, and Isabel, upon learning that Pablo plans to marry his girlfriend Marisol, a repetition of his own failed dreams. When Andrés confronts his son and proclaims that Marisol will not see a cent from his fútbol contract, Pablo discloses that Marisol is pregnant, and he expects to marry her. Unlike his father's treatment of his mother, Pablo loves his girlfriend. He does not embody the guilt and anger that his father Andrés exerts when he says, "You will break her heart. Control that girl. Put fútbol first. Don't be the idiot I was, letting a woman ruin



your life” (256). In this example, the father not only blames Isabel for his downfall but all women in general, including his innocent daughter Camila. Since Camila refuses to bear anymore verbal and physical exploitation from her father, especially as he tries to hit her mother, she and Pablo intervene. While they manage to save Isabel, Camila suffers a blow to her cheek from her father’s whip. When the police arrive to rescue them and place Andrés under arrest, it is the end of a cycle of dependency and fear in the Hassan household. A new chapter begins for Isabel, Pablo, and Camila who finally overturn patriarchal violence in the family to be able to live the life they deserve.

In *Furia* Saied Méndez connects domestic violence in Camila’s home with the larger violence against women in Argentina and more generally, Latin America. Friedman and Tabbush have examined how the murders and rapes of women in Latin America have often been neglected from institutions of support to the extent that they have had to take matters into their own hands. For example, the brutal murder of a woman in Argentina in 2015 instigated the social movement *Ni una menos* to draw social awareness and justice, very similar to the mothers and grandmothers in La Plaza de Mayo. As part of the South American literary diaspora in the U.S. like Saied Méndez, U.S. Ecuadorian Cornejo Villavicencio also pays homage to the courage of women of la Plaza de Mayo who continue to fight for social justice. According to Allende, *Las Tesis*, a group of four young Chilean women, raise consciousness about violence against women with their activist song, “A Rapist In Your Path” (145). In Camila’s community a young woman named Gimena Márquez was murdered and mentioned in the *Ni una menos* march on television (43). Andrés’s misogynist attitude toward this incident is further heightened when he discredits the gravity of the murders and rapes committed against young women and girls in Rosario. He defends his position by claiming that these crimes are not new nor newsworthy because they have been committed for centuries. This appalling remark leaves much critical food for thought. Camila reflects on how women are treated in society. She says, “None of the girls and women whose faces plastered the walls of our city had ever intended to become statistics, either, but they were blamed for the crimes committed against them” (203). This is a call for action, for social justice, for all those women who could no longer speak for themselves. When Camila is warned by Diego that she risks her own life by working late and may be

“the next girl on the poster,” alluding to the crimes and violence committed against young women, this statement implies that women are not only the victims of their aggressors, but they can also be judged as the instigators of such crimes by the surrounding people (family, friends) who supposedly support them. Torres, Fregoso and Bejarano also position women on both sides of the U.S./Latin American borderlands as victims of crimes committed against them based on their gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The murders of the women in Juárez are an example that this has not been completely resolved by important officials on both sides of the U.S./Mexico borders.

When Diego learns of Andrés’s domestic abuse against Camila and his subsequent arrest, he immediately flies to Rosario with two airplane tickets to return with Camila to Turín. He claims that he could probably get her an interview to play for the women’s team in Italy. Camila, however, rejects this offer because she wishes to play in the Sudamericano tournament and be able to show her talents to U.S. scouts to be able to play in the U.S. She wishes to earn opportunities on her own merit and break with the dependency that her ancestors had suffered even if it means breaking up with Diego and refusing his protection. This is another turning point in the novel where Saied Méndez rejects the fairy tale ending. O’Connor asserts that “It is our misfortune then that the fairy tales to which we tend, even yet, to be exposed, are those that present stereotypical views of females and males. They present a world where a woman’s prime meaning and justification for existence lies in her relationship with a man” (129). Even though Diego may have good intentions he must release Camila to be the independent woman she yearns to be.

In the context of the violence committed against young women in Rosario, Saied Méndez responds with the activism of the young futboleras such as Camila, Roxana, and their teammates in *Furia*. When Camila and Roxana learn that Eda, one of their teammate’s sister, was murdered after she met with her boyfriend secretly, the young women hold a candlelight vigil march in her memory. To honor Eda, the girls chant, “Ni una menos . . . Vivas nos queremos” (294). (Translation: Not one less, we want ourselves alive). Friedman explores critically the *Ni una menos* movement as a response to the violence committed against women in many Latin American countries even in the context of progressive governments (28-29). When Camila and Roxana feel guilty about playing fútbol in

the Sudamericano while one of their own has died, Coach Alicia confidently states, “Daring to play in this tournament is a rebellion, chicas. Not too long ago, playing fútbol was forbidden to women by law. But we’ve always found a way around it. Those who played before us played in circuses, in summer fairs, dressed as men. How many of you had to quit when you were around twelve, the same age as Edna, just because you dared to grow up?” (295) In other words, playing fútbol is a political act. Alicia reminds the young female players that they come from a long line of women who have risked their lives to enact their anger or “furia.” This statement also reminds Camila of how her mother Isabel had to give fútbol up at the age of twelve and who later becomes empowered through her daughter’s fútbol goals on the field and yells, “Vamos, Furia!”

The incentive to play fútbol pays off for Camila in the end because even though she and her team do not win the match, they tie with the defending champions from Paraguay at the Sudamericano tournament and she is spotted by a U.S. scout who proclaims that they will talk again. Hence, Camila is recruited by Gaby, Alicia’s sister in the U.S., for the Utah Royals Women’s Soccer team. Camila is able to continue her education and play fútbol, her lifelong goals, at the expense of breaking up with Diego who still believed in rescuing her like a prince charming.<sup>7</sup> As heartbreaking as their separation is, Camila survives and succeeds in the U.S. After a few years in the U.S., Diego calls her during a visit to reunite because he realizes that he has missed her as a lifelong friend more than a romantic interest. This mutual respect places Camila and Diego on equal footing, a cycle she breaks from her ancestresses, who had placed all their efforts on fathers, brothers, and husbands who did not always respect them.

### **Remembering the Ancestresses**

The success of Camila as a professional fútbol player in the U.S., Saied Méndez sustains, could not have happened without the recognition of the struggles of the women in her life—female ancestors, a spiritual patroness, women, and young girls who died mercilessly in Argentina. By remembering the females who made an impact on her, Camila credits them for their inner strength that helped them survive against all odds. In a powerful invocation she says,

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<sup>7</sup> In *Bend It Like Beckham*, the protagonist like Camila in *Furia* also wins a scholarship to study and play *fútbol* for a college team in the U.S. Both can follow their dreams in being professional and educated young women.

With a deep breath, I summon the spirits of my loved ones. Abuela Elena, the Andalusian with all the regrets and the broken heart. My Russian great-grandmother Isabel and her pillows embroidered with sayings. My Mom and her newborn freedom. She's opened her atelier and is living with Tía Graciela in an apartment downtown. My niece, Leyla, and her pure eyes. Roxana and her eternal friendship. . . Eda and all the other missing and murdered girls, resting in love. . . Karen, growing in power. All the unnamed women in my family tree, even the ones forced into it against their will, those who didn't ask to be my ancestors. *I have their warrior fire inside me.* I summon their speed, their resourcefulness, *their hunger for life.* (347, emphasis mine)

The spiritual invocation of important females in Camila's life can also be connected to the legend of La Difunta Correa, a popular female pagan figure originating in Vallecito, Argentina, resembling a saint who performed miracles and bestowed inspiration upon women in Argentina during moments of illness and despair. In *Furia* Saied Méndez references La Difunta Correa by mentioning the estampitas of her that Camila keeps (122, 206, 342). Camila may implore La Difunta for spiritual protection against her father's tyrannical patriarchy, request luck to win a fútbol match, or to be spotted by a U.S. scout to fulfill her lifelong dream of playing professionally. In the end, La Difunta comes through for Camila and thus, she believes in her for guidance and feminine spiritual power.<sup>8</sup> Before Camila departs from the airport in Rosario to the U.S. to play professionally, she and her friend Roxana visit La Difunta's shrine to pay their respect and gratitude for having helped them in moments of victory as well as desperation. Saied Méndez merges the social activism and consciousness with the spiritual to draw attention to the strength and confidence in these young women who should follow their dreams and goals, be it in *fútbol* or elsewhere, as much as young men in contemporary times. In *Furia*, through the courage of Camila and other female role models, Saied Méndez provides a cultural and literary landmark that blends gender and *fútbol* matters with the search for social justice for many women and young girls whose voices should no longer be silent nor forgotten in the remaking of the Argentine national and diasporic narrative.

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<sup>8</sup> See Cisneros's short fiction "Little Miracles" in *Woman Hollering Creek* for an example of another U.S. Latina who invokes a spiritual female figure who represents strength to inspire her.

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