FEMINIST CRITICISM

Women and the Revolution: The Poetry of Resistance of Latin American Women Writers

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Critics like Franz Fanon, Barbara Harlow and Epifanio San Juan define Third World literature as a literature of resistance, of struggle and revolution against Western imperialist discourse that has subjugated and continues to subjugate Asia, Africa and Latin America (or the Third World). This definition suggests several critiques of Western categories of knowledge in general and of literature in particular.

Firstly, it critiques "academic objectivity" and "scientific dispassion" and rejects its relevance in the study of the Third World. Fanon, for instance, in his critique of Mannoni's study of the "dependency complex" of the colonized Malagasy, shows that Mannoni fails to understand the real coordinates of the colonial situation because "he has not tried to feel himself into the despair of the man of color confronting the white man" (86). Similarly, Harlow cites how the critic Ghassan Kanafani disclaims any pretense to objectivity in his study of Palestinian resistance literature and instead immerses himself within the resistance movement to understand the historical conditions that have given rise to resistance literature (3).

Secondly, the definition of resistance literature questions Western notions of "literature" which posit that it should embody "universal" themes and reflect an "essential human condition" in forms that transcend political, social and cultural boundaries. Literature in this sense is written "for its own sake" and the writer is one who lives in an ivory tower, indulging in the narcissistic exercise of writing for no one but her/himself and her/his muse. Clearly, this definition of literature is ahistorical. It is also erroneous. As Mao Tse-tung in "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature" succinctly puts it, "there is no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics" (302). All works of

literature and art are political in that they are "products of the reflection in the human brain of the life of a given society" (297). The difference between "art for Art's sake" and revolutionary art is that the latter is "overtly political". It is an integral part of the larger political struggle against the people's oppressors (the imperialists and their local minions, the tyrants and colonial administrators).

Resistance literature seeks to reinscribe the history of the Third World which has been distorted, misrepresented or altogether ignored in Western discourse. This history is largely a history of colonization and the struggle for liberation. Thus, resistance literature shows how imperialism has undermined the people's consciousness (Fanon 97) in its destruction not only of political, social and economc institutions but also of cultural institutions. At the same time, it bears witness to the long history of struggle dating back to early resistance to colonial rule through the drive towards independence from the colonial powers through peasant revolts in the 18th and 19th centuries to todays's liberation movements.

These thematic concerns of resistance literature make formal aspects a secondary consideration in its evaluation, although this is not to say that aesthetic considerations no longer apply. Mao explains the importance of artistic quality in revolutionary literature and art. He says that works of art which lack artistic quality—by this he means works written in the poster and slogan style— "have no force, however progressive they are politically" (305). Moreover, TW literature calls for "a different organization of literary categories, one which is 'participatory' in the historical processes of hegemony and resistance to domination, rather than formal and analytic" (Harlow 9). Harlow identifies some of these categories articulated by Third World writers and critics, thus: for Ngugi, there should be two opposing literary aesthetics—that of oppression, exploitation and acquiescence to imperialism and that of human struggle for liberation; Mariategui insists on the periodization of Peruvian literature as colonial, cosmopolitan and national; Kanafani classifies Palestinian literature as literature under occupation and as exile literature (9-10). Fanon for his part, cites three stages for Third World literature, namely pre-independence literature, literature of "just-before-the-battle", and revolutionary literature (The Wretched of the Earth).

The study of Third World literature as resistance literature reveals certain problematic areas. Harlow cites the debate over the elaboration of a national culture in the light of continuing Western domination (in the form of neocolonialism) in many parts of the Third World. It seems that in the debate over the nature and function of national culture, it is necessary "to engage the traditional past", without romanticizing it, and "the present circumstances of Western hegemony" (20).

Another problematic area concerns the strategies of resistance against Western hegemony. Harlow discusses the dogmatic isolationism that characterized the "Arabization" of post-independence Algeria and the

Lebanese critic Elias Khouri's suggested alternative of "resistance" in the literary-critical sense. This means making use of the classical literary forms and stereotypes "in such a way as to undermine their power", and "manipulating language, Arabic, argot, and accent, to challenge the sway of classical conventions" (28).

Still another problem area in Third World literary studies is the question of homogeneity versus heterogeneity. Some critics descry the reductive potential of the term "Third World" as it seems to gloss over the historical and cultural differences among Asian, African and Latin American countries, and make of Third World literature yet another imperialist category (Harlow 6-7). E. San Juan Jr., for his part, asserts that "the concept of 'nation' in this moment of world history cannot be a homogenous reified totality" and emphasizes the centrality of the class struggle in the Third World (Art against imperialism 134). Similarly, Harlow warns against ignoring internal contradictions and debates, and against seeing the Third World as monolithic. She says, "The dynamics of debate in which the cultural politics of resistance are engaged challenge both the monolithic historiographical practices of domination and the unidimensional responses of dogma to them" (30).

To these concerns of resistance literature should be added the issue of gender, an issue which has often been elided by "monolithic historiographical practices of domination and unidimensional responses of dogma to them". Post-colonial feminist critics like Ketu Katrak, Cherrie Moraga and Jean Franco have discussed the need to examine the category of gender in colonial and post-colonial discursive practices. This involves the analysis of the dynamics between imperialism and capitalism on one hand, and patriarchy on the other, as well as the examination of the role of women in the cultural and political struggle for liberation. This paper on the poetry of resistance of Latin American women writers is an attempt towards this end. In their works, Latin American women writers show that while the history of Latin American countries is a history of colonialism, tyranny, genocide and poverty, it is also a history of survival, struggle and triumph and it is a history in which women have played a crucial though underestimated role. The Chilean poet Marjorie Agosin describes the role of women writers in Latin America thus:

The women writer in Latin America has taken on the role of witness; she has assumed the burden of the political barbarities of the society and has taken up her position as a deliberate act of defiance against the silence imposed by oppressive governments. The political activism in the literature of Latin American women, like the political actions of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and similar groups, has become an activity of incalculable force. The image so widespread of the woman writer as someone who escapes real life and dwells in a world of fantasy and dreams, has been replaced by the woman who aims her pen like a rifle and lets fly words of lead and steel. (qtd. in Bassnet 3)

These women who aim their pens "like rifles and let fly words of lead and steel" include Nancy Morejon of Cuba, Julia de Burgos of Puerto Rico; Clementina Suarez of Honduras; Delia Quinonez and Maria de los Angeles Ruano of Guatemala; Mercedes Durand, Lil Milagros Ramirez and Claribel Alegria of El Salvador; and Vidaluz Meneses, Daisy Zamora, Rosario Murillo and Giaconda Belli of Nicaragua. (In Volcan, 1983). Through their poetry, these women testify to the suffering of their people in the hands of colonial and neocolonial governments and thereby participate in the revolutionary struggle.

In her poem "They Fell On The Stairway", for instance, Mercedes Durand documents the massacre of worshippers in the cathedral in San Salvador—

They fell on the stairway
and others reached the main altar
and the cathedral lamps turn red
and the candles brightened their flames
and thousand of eyes looked at the corpses
and the bishop gave them absolution...
But they were already absolved!
and the machine guns vomited death
and the brown backs were pierced
and the wombs of future mothers spilled unborn children
and they died on the steps of the cathedral...(3)

In another poem titled "Requiem for the Sumpul", Durand addresses the river Sumpul, the grave of "six hundred lives", victims of torture and summary executions by the military—

...
your bed harbors skulls,
femurs,
skeletons,
the buzzards dig mountains of rotting flesh
and flocks of vultures gorge on intestines...

You never wanted it,
You never expected it,
You were friend to shepherds and children,
You carried
stars, stones,
casks,
and on that gruesome day
women's heads fell on your breast,
mangled men thundered in your waves,
and massacred children rolled in your bed!

Those were six hundred lives you shrouded.
Those were six hundred souls you devoured.
Those were six hundred dead worth a day's labor.
Those were six hundred decent people dying in your waters ... (7)

Similarly, the Nicaraguan Rosario Murillo, in her poem "Song of Wandering Times", recalls images of her suffering people—

The faces of my land!
a wrinkled hand, blackened by wind and sun
offering wares in the market
A flowered head beneath a palm basket
sad suspicious eyes beneath a straw hat,
a heart and a machete
a child in a rope hammock a flask of water, a gourd
and above all
a rifle
multiplying rifles
hundreds of rifles, thousands painfully spread
over the faces, over the skin of my land...(141)

Murillo's fellow Nicaraguan Giaconda Belli, in her poem "Free Country: July 19, 1979", also bears witness to the violent repression of her people during the dark days of the dictator even as she celebrates the success of the revolution. She writes:

...
So many years believing against wind and tide,
believing this day would be possible,
even after hearing the deaths of Ricardo, of Pedro, of Carlos...
of so many others they wrenched away,
pulling our eyes out but unable to blind us to this day
that now bursts in our hands... (131)

In these testimonies to oppression, there is always the condemnation of the oppressors, the local tyrants and their henchmen who, instead of championing the cause of the people, serve only their personal interests and the interests of their foreign overlords. The speaker in Claribel Alegria's poem "Everything is Normal in Our Courtyard", for instance, tells of "the inquisitor cultivating his rose", "the marquesa knitting forever", "the general" playing chess, and the "two guys fighting/one wants/the other to tell him/he knows that he knows/neither he/nor the other knows" while the speaker awaits execution. In "They Fell On The Stairway", Durand condemns "the soldiers and police guards and lieutenants/and the captains and majors and colonels and generals" who "drank their ration of blood/because for 47 years they have needed the people's plasma/to keep on living..." (3). In Maria de

los Angeles Ruano's "The Corpse", the speaker admits guilt not because s/he has actively participated in the torture of the "the corpse" but because s/he has, in her/his silent fear, somehow allowed the torture and failed to redress it. She writes:

> The corpse was there, brothers and sisters,
> and no one's eyes wept.
> We felt no pain nor did we pretend,
> we didn't notice its rags
> nor the rigid stillness of its jaws.
> We proceeded without seeing it, we disowned it,
> we didn't know its name, we didn't inquire,
> we simply continued without looking.
> We were terrorized with so much death,
> that blood of our blood now caused no grief.
> It remained alone, thrown in the middle of the street,
> its open eyes an accusation. (67)

These poems clearly underscore the poets' identification with the oppressed and with those who fight for their liberation. Clementina Suarez, in her poem "Combat," writes:

> I am a poet,
> an army of poets. And today I want to write a poem,
> a whistle poem
> a rifle poem.
> To stick to the doors,
> in prison cells,
> on school walls.
> Today I want to build and destroy,
> to raise hope on scaffolds.
> Wake the child
> archangel of swords,
> be lightning, thunder,
> with a hero's stature
> to root out, raze
> the rotten roots of my people. (79)

Similarly, Giaconda Belli's "Obligations of the Poet" outlines what it means to be a poet in a Third World country—

> Never consider yourself
> a privileged intellectual, a book-filled head repeating
> the same conversation, a withered doleful thinker.

You were born to thresh stars
and discover in the trees the laughter of the crowd,
you were born brandishing the future,
seeing through eyes, hands, feet, breast, mouth
foreteller of things to come
augur of days the sun is unaware it will rise on,
you were conceived on moonlit nights
when wolves howled and crazed fireflies raced,
your eyes were open when your head first entered the world

and your skin was softer and thinner
than that of those born with eyes closed,
you were favored by joy and sadness,
child of sea and storm,
created to seek treasures in swamps and deserts.
Your legacy was unbounded love,
confidence, unaffected simplicity,
the shadow of chilamate trees,
the trill of black mockingbirds.

Now the depths of the earth
give forth electricity to charge your song,
poems spill from sweaty faces
and eager hands holding primers and pencils;
now you have only to sing of what surrounds you,
the soft pitch
of the fervent voices
of the multitude. (127)

In these two poems, we find the articulation of the role of the poet in the Third World. It is a role that negates the Western stereotype of narcissistic life in an ivory tower of the poet manqué, and affirms instead the political responsibility of the poet-warrior to fight for national liberation. With these women poets, "it remains the case that the writer and the critic within the context of organized resistance movements comprehend the role of culture and cultural resistance as part of the larger struggle for liberation" (Harlow 10). Thus, in this context, it is not only the poet who must fight with words but also the people. As Belli's last stanza underscores, "poems spill from sweaty faces/and eager hands holding primers and pencils". In the end, it is possible to triumphantly declare with Murillo that "we make a revolution when we make a poem" (qtd. in Murray 178).

Thus far we have seen how the poetry of these Latin American women advances the revolutionary cause. But for them, the object of resistance is

not only anti-people tyrranical governments and foreign imperialists; the revolutionary goal is not only national liberation. The emancipatory project of these women writers is, in fact, "a vast polemic against colonialism *and* the traditional position of woman, as well as a rejection of the corresponding myths and mythologizations" (Diocaretz 101). A key image in their poetry is that of Eve, "the new woman in a new revolutionary order" (Murray 184).

And so we find in the resistance poetry of Latin American women such themes as acknowledging solidarity with other women. Vidaluz Meneses' poem "Cachikel Woman" and Daisy Zamora's "Letter To A Sister Who Lives In A Distant Country" are two such poems.

The former is a kind of tribute to the Indian woman:

I have touched the furrows of centuries
in your cheeks, Cachikel woman.
The mistrusted commercial ritual
of bargaining,
your impassive weaver's position;
Ghandian knees on the soil
and hands like swift squirrels
lacing the threads of a tablecloth
an apron or a rug
that will speak of you
in other latitudes,
brown Penelope.

Silent compañera who braided your lover's hair
beneath the moon
that howling old wolves wanted to ensnare.
Pregnant belly that aborted
the blonde children of conquistadores.
Diligent shadow-symbol:
tradition made woman. (115)

While this poem seems to fix woman as tradition and to portray her in an immobilized state, it does recognize the woman's resistance, albeit silent and subtle, to the colonizer. She remains mistrustful of the capitalist enterprise, perhaps recognizing the oppression it must mean for her and her people (their modification), and continues to insist on her role as producer (weaver). Also, the poem acknowledges that she is a recorder of history too, in ways that deviate from and perhaps subvert the imperialist privileging of the written word: she inscribes history not on paper and with ink but on the rug or apron that she weaves with her hands. Thus, she inscribes not only history but also her-story ("...that will speak of you...brown Penelope"). Finally, the violent image of her "pregnant belly that aborted the blonde chil-

dren of conquistadores" underscores the particular sexual violence women become prey to in the colonizer's invasion of the land. It also underscores the fact that she is no passive receptacle of his seed and thereby shatters the conventional, patriarchal icon of woman-as-mother.

In Zamora's "Letter to a Sister in Exile" the speaker renews ties with a sister in a distant land. At the same time, she suggests that her continued stay in their native land, fraught with violence though it is, is a kind of resistance to the forces that would exile her and make her turn her back on her people. She too could have gone to a distant country but she chose to stay. This is suggested by the lack/absence of any hint of sadness in her description of the beauty of her country—

> The coconut palms are now being harvested in the garden
> and summer is redenning the gentians in the orchard.
> Blue and beautiful are the days, clear and fresh.
> My beloved places are also yours.
> Across thousands of miles my words touch you
> like the bird now seen perched on a coconut.
> Time and distance have been prolonged.
> But one of these luminous days
> (the rosebuds are full of buds)
> or a more distant day in winter
> (there are flowering laurel on all the highways,
> and cashews and mangos and yellow corteces)
> with the last sun or in the first rain
> we will gather the fruits of hope. (125)

Also reflected in Latin America women's poetry is the fact that while the women's struggle for national liberation is rooted in "the familiar domestic and maternal icons of womanhood", these are infused with "new meanings and new parameters" (Bassnett 3). This is illustrated by Murillo's "I'm going to Plant a Heart on the Earth," a poem that gives womanly, maternal love revolutionary force. She writes:

> I'm going to plant a heart that knows no arithmetic
> that won't leave some to one side
> and others on the floor in fractions
> that suffers only childbirth and feigned illness
> I'm going to fly a heart like a comet
> one of blood and cosmic dust
> a mixing of earth with stars
> a heart that has no country
> that knows no borders
> a heart that will never be fired

that has never signed a single check
that has never had a strongbox
a heart, unnerving, unnameable,
something simple and sweet,
a heart that has loved. (143, 145)

Admittedly, the poem articulates a false binary opposition between heart and mind, between spiritual and material, and tends to romanticize the former. Nevertheless, it exposes the erroneous semanticization of woman's love as that expressed only in maternity and the need for masculine protection.

In another poem titled "Daguerrotype of Mother," Murillo traces the steps of a woman who could be both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a modern Nicaraguan mother. The last stanza speaks of—

A woman, a heart, a star
rises up purified by searing pain
with the pain of a son who
surrenders to be sacrificed at dawn.(qtd. Murray 187)

Again the patriarchal notion of woman as one whose fulfillment lies only in motherhood to a heroic son (not daughter) that leaps at one from these verses, is extremely disturbing. However, like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo of Argentina who publicly display the photographs of the 'desaperici-dos' in spite of the bullying presence of the military, these verses suggest the deterritorialization of the term "mother" from its literal meaning as biological reproducer of children, and its reterritorialization in the social and political domain where mothers become mothers not only of sons and daughters but more importantly, of revolutionaries (Franco 514). Giaconda Belli's "Seguiremos Naciendo" advances the same idea very strongly. In this poem, Belli reflects with pride and hope on her having given birth to her daughter's conciousness as she watches her daughter being initiated into the Sandinista youth -

Come and give me your hand
your young, fighting hand.
Now we are joined by blood and Revolution
we can face together
this future of war and victory.
...
and when you love a man
and then when life comes out of your life,
we'll be born yet again,
many times over,
keeping our flag coloured red. (qtd. in Murray 187)

Another poet who deconstucts the traditional position of woman and rejects "corresponding myths and mythologizations" is Julia de Burgos. In her poem "To Julia de Burgos", she writes:

> The people are saying that I am your enemy,
> That in poetry I give you to the world
>
> They lie, Julia de Burgos.
> They lie, Julia de Burgos.
> The voice that rises in my verses is not your voice:
> it is my voice;
> For you are the clothing and I am the essence;
> Between us lies the deepest abyss.
>
> You are the bloodless doll of social lies
> And I the virile spark of human truth;
>
> You are the honey of courtly hypocrisy; not I—
> And I bare my heart in all my poems.
>
> You, like your world, are selfish; not I—
> I gamble everything to be what I am.
>
> You are only the serious lady, Senora. Dona Julia.
> Not I. I am life. I am strength. I am woman.
>
> You belong to your husband, your master. Not I:
> I belong to nobody or to all, for to all, to all
> I give myself in my pure feelings and thoughts.
>
> You curl your hair and paint your face. Not I:
> I am curled by the wind, painted by the sun.
>
> You are the lady of the house, resigned, submissive,
> Tied to the bigotry of men. Not I:
>
> I am Rocinante, bolting free, wildly
> Snuffling the horizons of the justice of God.

The poem articulates a split female subject. On the one hand, there is the patriarchal and colonial subject—the demure lady, the domesticated wife and mother, restricted, without freedom. On the other hand, there is the revolutionary subject—the liberated woman, active, free, but most of all engaged in the communal struggle against social injustice. The poem exposes the lie that the latter self, the Julia de Burgos who writes, is the

enemy. More importantly, it shatters the false dichotomy between the personal and the political.

Finally, it must be noted that Latin American women, in their poetry and fiction, have begun to use a special form of language which Luisa Valenzuela describes as "a fascination with the disgusting". They use this language to describe the horror and the violence of their people's experience. According to Valenzuela,"The body has to know the disgust, absorb it meaningfully, in order to say all its words. There can be no censorship through the mouth of a woman, so words can finally come out in all their strength that has been obliterated from feminine speech ever since the notion of 'lady' was invented by men" (qtd. in Bassnett 4). In poems such as Durand's and Ruano's, as well as those of many other women poets in Latin America, we see the use of this "strong language" against oppression.

In closing, I assert the need to attend to the woman's voice in the study of resistance literature. "A revolutionary change does not guarantee an automatic equality of the sexes" (Katrak 161). Susan Bassnet points out that "despite advances gained by women in successive revolutions, fundamental assumptions about the role of the female still remain" (4). Chief of these assumptions is that women are keepers of tradition, particularly against a foreign enemy. The reification of traditions, albeit "to counteract colonialist, racist attitudes that desecrate native culture", poses many obvious dangers for women. Traditions governing female sexuality in particular, are by and large oppressive (Katrak 168). In Latin America, women have to contend with machismo which elevate men to privileged and superior status both in society and in the family, and reduce women to their reproductive functions and define them as "agents in the transmission and diffusion of the patriarchal system's existing stereotypes" (Latin American & Carribean Women's Collective 8).

Machismo is, of course, not peculiar to Latin America. It is also not a "pure" relation between men and women. In their analysis of this phenomenon, the Latin America and Carribean Women's Collective points out that cultural stereotypes of masculine and feminine correspond to an economic and social system—the class system—which victimizes not only women but also men. To quote: "The macho is himself the victim of a system whose relations of production are constituted by the exploitation of one part of society in order to ensure the domination of a minority and to safeguard that minority's interests" (8).

Moreover, the imperialist axiomatic of power and domination is itself based on a model of "male supremacy". As Jean Franco notes, "Domination has been traditionally semanticized in sexual terms and power has traditionally been associated with masculinity" (506). Genuine revolution therefore means dismantling these semanticizations of power and domination, signs which justified the imperialist subjugation of theThird World.

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