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**UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

DEPARTMENT OF HISPANIC STUDIES

**INSCRIBING IDENTITIES:  
CHILEAN WOMEN WRITERS OF THE POST-COUP  
GENERATION**

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF M.PHIL IN  
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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is the literary output of the women writers of the Chilean 'post-coup generation'; that is, authors whose main body of work has been produced in the period following the military coup of 1973. Specifically, I examine the work of the novelists Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit, Lucía Guerra and finally Pía Barros. My main point of interest is exploring the deleterious consequences of dictatorship, censorship and exile on women's writing, and in establishing the narrative strategies adopted in response to such conditions.

The twenty or so years following the coup in Chile were a period of intense socio-political transition, with decisive practical, theoretical and ideological implications. This thesis considers the literary representations of the struggle of the female subject to delineate a subjective identity in the face of the crises of language, semiotics and the very nature of the social contract. The tenets of authoritarianism can be considered a heightened form of the principles of patriarchy, and it is in the light of these hierarchies of power that I examine the female subject's quest for autonomy and the techniques employed in confronting the resultant simulacrum of identity. By carrying out a thematic analysis of the nine novels, I work towards an epistemology of late twentieth-century Chilean feminism, and consider the social, political, cultural and historical imperatives which have defined it. The social negotiations of power, whether these be contextualised within the micro-structure of a family, in the contrived conception of gender or in the inflections of the authoritarian discourse, are evaluated in terms of their contribution to the ontology of the Chilean female subject - an ontology all the more precarious within a nation struggling to assert a cogent identity of its own.

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## INTRODUCTION

The violent overthrow of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende in September of 1973 and the murder, disappearance and torture of many of his supporters were unprecedented events in a country which had until that time considered itself the democratic paradigm of Latin America. The presidency of Allende's predecessor, the centrist Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei, had been characterised by a period of intensifying social activity, with Frei's government passing in 1967 a basic agrarian reform bill which allowed the State to redistribute fifteen million acres of land to small farmers. By 1970, such policies were continued and advanced by the Unidad Popular, a coalition of several left-wing parties whose main support lay in the campesinado and the working classes - but whose election majority of just 36.3% of the popular vote was sufficiently meagre to imperil the position of its leader Allende. Having taken office, the Unidad Popular immediately began to implement its programme of socialist reforms; nationalising industries, expropriating foreign-owned companies and redistributing land to small farmers (many co-operatives were consequently formed). However, a combination of factors resulted in the deterioration of the state of the economy; inflation soared, demand outstripped supply, and the country experienced worsening shortages. (Interestingly, despite this, the Unidad Popular managed to increase its share of the popular vote to 43% in the mid-term elections of early '73.)

On the eleventh of September 1973 military forces led by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte surrounded and bombarded the presidential palace, in an attack which resulted in the death of the elected president <sup>(1)</sup>. The military coup was supported by various sections of the Church in Chile, opposed to Allende's campaign for secular education, and, naturally, by the U.S. government, which immediately expressed its support for the new military regime and provided economic and military backing. The junta, under Pinochet's command, was to control Chile for the next sixteen years.

The worst period of repression occurred in the years following the coup; the new regime imposed stringent censorship, prohibited union and most forms of social activities, and committed widespread human rights abuses (creating a context where "to disappear" assumed all the resonances of a transitive verb). This initial stage of the regime was characterised by the wilful effacement of

historical axioms, the invalidation of the collective social consciousness and the negation of memory. The concept of 'truth' was to become a monopolised commodity.

Between the late 1970's and early 80's Pinochet's government began to expedite foreign investment in Chile, as the country embraced the principles of the neoliberal market economy. However, this period of economic optimism was not to endure, and with the collapse of the economy in 1982 and the government in crisis, repressive measures were somewhat relaxed in response to the undermining of Pinochet's political authority. 1983 witnessed a resurgence of popular resistance, culminating in mass street demonstrations protesting against the dictatorship and pot-banging sessions in working-class areas; the refractory expression of collective discontent. The hopes for redemocratization were not realised, however, and by the end of 1984 the regime had once again imposed stringent tactics - 1985 was to prove a particularly repressive year.

It was not until the plebiscite of October 1988 that Chileans had the opportunity to oust Pinochet; the 'NO' campaign waged was hugely successful, with a large majority voting to end the Pinochet presidency. Pinochet himself did not retire until 1989, although he remained as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and retained the right to appoint eight members of the Senate (he had also awarded himself the title of 'Senator for Life', an epithet which ensured his immunity against any future charges of human rights abuses). The elections of 1990 saw the appointment of the Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin, with redemocratization furthered by the election of Eduardo Frei (son of the former president) in 1994.

The coup of 1973 had ruptured the cultural and psychological landscapes of Chile as well as the political one; attenuating the prominent status which culture had come to acquire under the socialist government <sup>(2)</sup> and effectively expunging the former conception of art as a vehicle of collective social expression. Literally overnight, under the proscriptive agency of the new regime, a cultural hiatus occurred, with artistic production now governed by the imperatives of interdiction. The 'function' of art was circumscribed as a private and even clandestine occasion <sup>(3)</sup>; shifting from a representational medium to one which was characterised by obliquity and ellipsis; now subject to the exigencies of censorship. The disappearance, imprisonment and exodus of many artists and intellectuals following the coup came to be termed "el apagón cultural" <sup>(4)</sup>, as

certain musical instruments were prohibited (particularly those which were associated with the Unidad Popular government), film production dwindled and theatre was obliged to become a mute rehearsal of gesture and mime.

It was from within this context that groups such as CADA (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte) emerged; with their rhetoric of the body as a semantic instance, a social signifier through which it was possible - and necessary - to intervene in and evolve a critique of authoritarian praxes. The subject's body, the focus of much of Chilean performance art at this time, was the site of convergence of external conditions, the microcosmic reflection of the disarticulated national body <sup>(5)</sup>. In this, the somatic reality depicted was merely a reflection of the psychosis of a nation which had undergone the larceny of historical certainties, as collective memory was arrested and then obliterated by the "punto final" of the investigations of repression.

Literature, too, suffered a kind of schizophrenic divergence. Not only in the bifurcating modes of writing produced by the two at times inconsonant factions of writers - those remaining in Chile and those in exile - but in the very enunciative structures of writing; the lacunae, allegories and ellipses. As books were publicly burned, censorship imposed and publishing houses closed down, the function of writing (already an inherently politicised activity within Latin America) became "dar nombre a las cosas, volver a releer el continente, buscar el lugar desde el no lugar" <sup>(6)</sup>.

The authoritarian regime further marginalised the position of Chilean women within an already phallogocentric social system. Social institutions - the legal system, the Church, the family - were deployed as effective agents in perpetuating the dictatorship's conception of 'woman'; an essentialist paradigm which espoused the Marianist principles of abnegation. Biological determinism decreed the female role as that of wife and preferably mother; whose primary function was the indoctrination of children with the nationalist values of the regime. The response of women to this reductive generic ideology came to define the very nature of post-coup 'feminism' <sup>(7)</sup> within Chile; by 1985, twelve years after the coup, the number of women's cultural organisations <sup>(8)</sup> had more than doubled, as a feminist critique of the official discourse began to evolve.

It is Brito's concept of the 'no lugar' which is the thematic nub of the novels considered in this thesis, a thematic which, it will be shown, has a

particular pertinence to women writing under dictatorship. This 'no lugar' has multiplicitous resonances throughout the work of the authors studied; Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit, Lucía Guerra and Pía Barros. Perhaps most tangibly, the notion of 'no lugar' is present in the treatment of exile, an exile which is at once linguistic, cultural, political and metaphysical; a theme salient in the work of Isabel Allende. It is continually revealed in the novels of Diamela Eltit - in the theme of the body as a colonised space and fragmented entity, in the family, as the hegemony of the traditional cultural model is displaced yet not necessarily replaced, in the notion of 'encierro', as the inner space is shown unable to escape the contagion of the aberrant external, and in the dialectic of the city and "el Sur", with its 'no lugar' of marginality. It is fundamental, too, in the themes of language and identity (common to the work of Guerra and Barros); in the negation and silence of ciphered speech and in the 'no lugar' of disidentity; the absence of a subjective organicity.

In this thesis I examine the novelistic enterprise of four women writers whose greatest point of convergence may be said to be the contention of generic conventions and the resultant diaspora of subjective identity. I have chosen to explore the work of each author on an individual basis, considering the varying thematic issues arising from each text, with greatest emphasis awarded to the work of Diamela Eltit. The main focus of my analysis is the authors' quest to appropriate their own effective set of discourses and their narrative strategies in achieving this end: "cómo sobrevivir en un sistema opuesto conceptualmente al suyo; cómo reconquistar esa memoria y su lenguaje; cómo responder a la demanda cada vez más creciente del país por restaurar su Historia" <sup>(9)</sup>.

## NOTES: INTRODUCTION

1. The exact cause of Salvador Allende's death is still disputed; some attest that he was shot by the armed forces, while Pinochet supporters claim he took his own life in the attack.
2. The Chilean left held art to be "un arma de liberación y lucha social" (*La Novela Chilena de Exilio: El Caso de Isabel Allende*, Santiago, Universidad de Chile, 1993, p.36). Under Allende, theatre groups had proliferated (theatre was subsidised by his government) and more films were made in that period than at any other point in the history of Chilean cinema.
3. Carmen Galarce defines the dictatorship's approach to culture in the following terms: "El programa de la dictadura comprende medidas destinadas a borrar de una plumada cincuenta años de historia que la mitología oficialista interpretó como el 'cáncer social'. De este modo se conformará una sociedad nueva en la que se privilegiará lo privatizante sobre lo colectivo y la individualidad frente a la pluralidad" (Ibid., p.65.).
4. Ibid., p.40.
5. Eugenia Brito discusses the importance of the body under dictatorship in *Campos Minados*: "Durante los primeros años de la dictadura emerge una zona de barricada hasta entonces impensable en Chile: será el cuerpo, escenario de protesta o de acción histriónica. El cuerpo como un doble del pensamiento, tomado por la neurosis o bien parcelado en pulsiones fragmentarias, muchas de ellas letales, en otras, animado por un impulso de restauración" (*Campos Minados: Literatura Postgolpe en Chile*, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1990, p.11).
6. Brito, Eugenia, *Campos Minados: Literatura Postgolpe en Chile*, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1990, p.13
7. The difficulty of categorising a Latin American feminism has often been discussed by authors and critics. Pía Barros has referred to the issue in the following terms: "En nuestros países tercermundistas la vida es un privilegio que tú tienes y puedes perder teórica, ideológica o físicamente en cualquier segundo. Tú no puedes aplicar la teoría de alguien que está luchando por una calidad de vida a un sujeto que simplemente se esfuerza por mantener lo básico de la subsistencia. Son dos cosas distintas, y eso te obliga a la producción de una teoría y de textos creativos distintos...Te exige considerar como transgresiones el desvestirte y revestirte como sujeto así como el hecho de escribir, de apropiarte de un lugar desde donde hablar"; García-Corales, G., "La Lucha Por La Inclusión de la Literatura Femenina Actual: El Caso de Pía Barros", *Revista Monográfica*, vol. 13, 1997, p.394-405
8. Of these groups, 'La Morada', run by Julieta Kirkwood, and the publishing house Editorial Cuarto Propio, were to prove particularly influential.
9. Brito, Eugenia, *Campos Minados: Literatura Postgolpe en Chile*, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1990, p.21

**I**

**ISABEL ALLENDE**

## INTRODUCTION

Isabel Allende is undoubtedly the most internationally well-known of Chilean female writers, owing in large part to the success of her first novel, *La Casa de los Espíritus*. Born in Lima in 1942, although raised mostly in Chile, she worked for several years as a journalist <sup>(1)</sup> before undertaking to write her first novel in exile in Venezuela, having been forced to flee Chile following the coup in which Salvador Allende, her uncle, was killed. The theme of exile, whether as a physical circumstance or existential condition, informs much of her work. Her novels are seen to fulfil a didactic and denunciatory function; a contestatory site with which to challenge the validity of logocentric principles. Allende has become famous for her use of magical realism, a narrative technique which negates the univocal official discourse by incorporating and juxtaposing alternative and yet simultaneous versions of reality. <sup>(2)</sup> This merging together of the fictitious with the historical is mirrored by the narrative fusion of the personal and the collective; Allende's novels privilege the enunciation of the female subject, creating a polyphonous female testimony. Although her brand of feminism has been disputed by some critics, it is characterised by the impulse to disarticulate the patriarchal paradigm <sup>(3)</sup> while managing to stay faithful to the Latin American context (at no point does her concept of feminism appear a restrictive ideology, irrelevant to the female subaltern as an imperialist weapon).

I shall be considering two of Allende's novels; *La Casa de los Espíritus* and the later *Eva Luna*.

**NOTES: ISABEL ALLENDE**

1. Allende acknowledges the influence of her journalistic training in an interview with Michael Moody; *Hispania*, 1986, Vol. 69, No.1, p.150: "Le agradezco al periodismo enormemente toda la base que me dio para poder escribir hoy novelas".
2. Allende esteems magical realism as one of the defining features of contemporary Latin American literary success: "La originalidad y el mérito de los escritores latinoamericanos ha sido darle el mismo valor a la realidad objetiva que a lo subjetivo" - see *Para Leer A Isabel Allende* by Marcelo Coddou, (Santiago: LAR, 1988), p.179
3. Allende has spoken of her wish to dismantle patriarchal authority in the following terms: "Toda mi vida he estado cuestionando la autoridad, toda forma de autoridad, empezando con la autoridad patriarcal. La autoridad de la Iglesia, la del gobierno, la de las jerarquías, de las clases sociales; todo lo he cuestionado siempre" - see "An Interview with Isabel Allende", with P. Álvarez-Rubio, *Revista Iberoamericana*, 1994, Vol.60, No.168-69, p.1069

## CHAPTER ONE: *LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS*

### INTRODUCTION

*La Casa de los Espíritus*, first published in 1982, can be considered a seminal work in post-coup Chilean women's writing, in that its unprecedented public success brought the issues surrounding the Chilean dictatorship to the awareness of an almost universal audience. (The novel has been translated into many languages and to date twenty-eight editions of the text have been published.) Blending the account of a family history with the events of an unnamed (but clearly identifiable <sup>[1]</sup>) socio-historical context, *La Casa de los Espíritus* dissembles a covert form of social testimony through the vicissitudes of the family saga.

Although viewed as a gynocentric text, the novel in fact centres on the life and character of a man, Esteban Trueba. It is Trueba who forms the central link not only between the various female characters of the dynasty, but also between the various thematic concerns of the novel. Unlike most of the female characters, he is granted a direct voice within the narrative through his monological first-person accounts. The fact that Trueba, the embodiment of patriarchal and oligarchic values, is awarded such a voice within a context dominated by a female narration suggests a tone of conciliation on the author's part. This syncretic impulse is necessitated by the system of binarisms on which the text is constructed: city and country, male and female, interior and exterior, silence and speech, hegemony and marginality.

One of the most striking techniques adopted in *La Casa de los Espíritus* is that of magical realism, juxtaposing outlandish and even incredible happenings with the mundane routine of the characters' daily existences. The key figure of Clara facilitates this technique, situated as she is within an ethereal, supernatural realm which informs the lives of those around her. Prolepsis too is often employed as an effective means of furthering and expediting the story, while the use of the intra-diegetic narrator of Alba lends the text a strong metatextual character.

Of the many themes emerging from Allende's first novel, my particular interest is in examining those with generic relevance; the first of which is the structure and relations of power within the novel.

## THE RELATIONS OF POWER

The social configurations of power in *La Casa de los Espíritus* are broad and diverse - sexual, economic, political, racial, class-based - but they are never considered mutually exclusive. Often, indeed, these terms conflate, resulting in a clearly defined system of social hierarchy in which the agents of oligarchy and patriarchy emerge as hegemonic. By centring on the lives of individual characters, *La Casa de los Espíritus* employs a technique of metonymy; the individual and subjective are portrayed as the speculum of the properties of an entire nation.

Thus the head of the family is the truculent patriarch, Esteban Trueba, a man who, in his violence and intransigence, incarnates the values and principles of the family paradigm: "Era fanático, violento y anticuado, pero representaba mejor que nadie los valores de la familia, la tradición, la propiedad y el orden" (p.323 <sup>[2]</sup>). (The image of the family as a national microcosm is also subtended by Trueba's political status as senator; the social 'family' is also to suffer greatly under his political ideals.)

The family micro-structure is revealed to be consistently androcentric. It is solely the male surname which legitimates a child's existence; it is for this reason that Trueba goes to great lengths to secure the surname of a perverted French count for his unborn grandchild, and also serves as the basis for his wish to marry Clara: "¡Me casé para tener hijos legítimos que lleven mi apellido, y no bastardos que lleven el de la madre!" (p.242). In other families, too, the same androcentric principles are evident. The seating arrangements for family meals in the Del Valle household are observed according to the "estricto orden de dignidad y gobierno" (p.18), while Doña Ester, Trueba's mother, spurns the years of devoted attention of her daughter in favour of the sole male member of the family, her callously indifferent son. The character of Férula, Trueba's sister, is one of the more tragic female figures of the novel, evincing the effects of the restrictive axioms of the hierarchical family structure. Condemned by her status as a female to an abject existence as her mother's carer, Férula resents the freedom which her brother possesses, both in terms of his economic independence and his autonomy of character: "Era de gestos bruscos y torpes, con el mismo mal carácter de su hermano, pero obligada por la vida, y por su condición de mujer, a dominarlo y a morder el freno" (p.53). Doomed to remain within the confines of "esas paredes hediondas a vejez" (p.55), Férula becomes a chary, abnegating character, with a strong tendency towards self-immolation and mortification. Financially reliant

upon her brother, Férula's sole means of exerting power is that of reproaching Trueba for his financial excesses and, later, colluding with Clara in subverting his authority.<sup>(3)</sup> Férula even succeeds in wielding this former power after her death, managing to produce feelings of culpability in her brother.

It is largely women's economic dependence on men which ensures their ancillary social status, a fact exemplified by the character of Blanca. Considering that his daughter's role is that of marriage, Trueba takes no interest in Blanca's education, with the result that in adult life she remains financially reliant upon her father; the pottery figures which she produces, her "único medio de vida" (p.187) too little to support herself and her child. A comparable social strategy is deployed with regard to the campesinos. By withholding an education from his tenants, Trueba ensures their unquestioning compliance and dependence; maintaining them in a state of illiteracy, he makes certain that "no se les llenara la cabeza con ideas inapropiadas a su estado y condición" (p.70).<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, Trueba's statement that "Yo era como un padre para ellos" (p.63) takes on further resonances - in effect his approach is to infantilise the campesinos, the word 'padre' denoting not a benevolent paternal presence but rather an oppressive, imperious authority.

It is perhaps the scene describing Pancha García's rape at the hands of Esteban Trueba which presents the most complete conflation of the interrelations of power. Allende employs a great deal of symbolism in this passage; the horse connoting strength and virility, the phallic symbolism of the thrusting spurs, the river signifying the constant stream of history wherein the female role of subjugation is perpetuated. Issues of race, class and sex each come into play in this depiction of a crime which will go on to define later generations; Pancha, who has "facciones anchas y la piel oscura" (p.67), is economically and physically subordinate to Trueba, who is also symbolically 'above' her, regarding her "desde la altura del caballo" (p.68). In contrast, her head is lowered, "por la costumbre ancestral de todas las mujeres de su estirpe de bajar la cabeza ante el macho" (p.68). What is most striking about this account is the voiceless condition of Pancha, who passively resigns herself to "el mismo destino de perra" (p.68) suffered by her female ancestors.

In fact, it is precisely this condition of muteness which characterises the oppressed within the novel. The narrative repeatedly portrays certain characters as being without a voice; Rosa, who is to die as a result of a political crime, is

described as possessing a "carácter silencioso" (p.15); on the occasion when Trueba first meets Clara, he views her as a "pequeña sombra silenciosa" (p.45); Pedro Segundo García is frequently depicted as silent <sup>(5)</sup>; Nicolás realises his ignorance of the "silenciosa clase media" (p.249); the Indians who serve at the count's table are described as "indios inmutables" (p.265) and Blanca realises that "entre su padre y el conde francés había un arreglo comercial en el que ella no tenía nada que decir" (p.262). Thus characters differentiated by boundaries of class and race are shown to share the common bond of voicelessness, a condition which renders them invalid within the social configurations of power. These characters lack an individual voice, much less the collective one which the narrative deems imperative for the emancipation of the socially-oppressed. It is notable that the many inversions of power occur only after the election of the socialist party to government; the democratic expression of the collective will. Yet, paradoxically, it is the use of silence within an individual context which forms another of the narrative's thematic concerns; the wilful silence of Clara, the central female protagonist.

### 'MAGICAL FEMINISM' <sup>(6)</sup>

The question of the feminist discourse in Allende's novels is a controversial one. Some critics have perceived her female characters as little more than reductive stereotypes, while Allende herself has defended her characters as realistic depictions of a Latin American female identity; one which is subject to the patriarchal social imperatives operative within the Latin American context. Yet it is possible to read *La Casa de los Espíritus* as a profoundly feminist novel, in as much as it promotes the emancipation of the female identity from the social structures of power which define it.

This identity has been traditionally associated with the realm of domesticity; the private, licit, closed space, often the sole arena in which women were permitted to exercise any power. Doña Ester, the bedridden mother of Trueba, is the metaphor of this traditional female destiny of domestic confinement; her eventual death the result of being eaten alive by the parasites which infest her body - killed, metaphorically, by her own confinement. This same fate, however, is avoided by most of the other female characters, many of whom are shown to possess certain strategies which they employ to overcome and subvert their fated condition. Trueba's pretensions in constructing a house as "el reflejo de él" (p.105), a place which will allow him to immure his wife and children, are

subverted by its female inhabitants, who convert it into the site of paranormal and telekinetic activity, and where, unbeknown to Trueba, political prisoners of the opposition find refuge. Trueba's intentions in constructing the house have been foreshadowed earlier in the novel, in his description of the fictional palace in which he would have liked to house Rosa: "...donde la habría mantenido secuestrada y donde sólo yo tuviera acceso" (p.47). Yet Clara is at no point depicted as a victim of such incarceration, rather, she invests the domestic context with her own ethereal and hieratic presence. The main strategies which she deploys are those of silence, spiritual practice, the writing of diaries and the recourse to a vague, distracted type of behaviour which is conducive in provoking the sentiment of protection in those around her. In this way she is effectively infantilised, not only by Trueba but by Férula and la Nana, who compete for the privilege of administering to her needs. (This fact also attests to the unfulfilled and rather doleful lives of these two women.) In this sense, the tactics of Clara can be viewed as somewhat manipulative, particularly her apparent indifference to the management of domestic tasks, which allows her to elude them altogether: "Blanca...Estaba muy ocupada en la casa, porque Clara se desentendió de los asuntos domésticos con el pretexto de que jamás tuvo aptitud para ellos" (p.225). Clara's recourse to a vague, ethereal demeanour is successful too in other areas, as in her interactions with Trueba. Her feigning not to apprehend the depths of her husband's rage is a means of defusing his authority, as, for instance, when she responds to his raving tirades with innocuously impertinent questions (p.118). Her polite indifference to the gifts which Trueba bestows on her produces a similar effect; by not displaying suitable gratitude and humility, she deprives Trueba of the feeling of power: "Lo exasperaba que Clara nunca parecía estar realmente agradecida de nada y nunca necesitaba algo que él pudiera darle" (p.141). Clara's unconventional behaviour, her use of spiritualism and the techniques of witchcraft, allow her to inscribe her own private, autonomous realm, from which men remain excluded: "parecía irse desplegando irremisiblemente de la realidad y volcándose hacia el interior de sí misma" (p.112). This withdrawal to the private state has a dualistic effect: it subverts the conventions which have sought to relegate the female to the private realm, while displacing the patriarch's prerogative of ownership; Trueba "estaba consciente de que la mujer que reposaba a su lado no estaba allí, sino en una dimensión desconocida a la que él jamás podría llegar" (p.142). It is significant that when circumstances preclude Clara's refuge in spiritualism, she is obliged to become "una mujer eficiente" (p.180), "una señora común" (p.181), euphemisms for the tedious, mundane existences of her female contemporaries.

Another tactic used to subvert patriarchal authority is the influence exercised over children by the female characters. Both Clara and Blanca evince this strategy; Clara refuses to coddle Blanca as a child, treating her as an autonomous, intelligent being, prohibits Alba's playing with dolls (effigies of a mute, compliant, female identity) and encourages in both her daughter and granddaughter the recourse to artistic activity as a vehicle of self-expression (she urges Blanca to continue with her pottery, initiates Alba's interest in painting and later inspires Alba's writing). The subversive maternal influence is epitomised by Alba's considering the paternal figure as extraneous and by Jaime's appropriation of the maternal surname, an action which negates the validity of the patriarchal system wherein the social legitimacy of children is determined by their paternal surname. Indeed, it is Clara who assumes the right to name her children, enraging Trueba and foreclosing the male prerogative of naming, exemplified in the Biblical account of Adam and Eve. This negation of male ascendancy is also manifest in the stories which Blanca relates to Alba, in which gender-roles are inverted and it is the primacy and agency of the female element which are accentuated: "Así se enteró Alba de un príncipe que durmió cien años, de doncellas que peleaban cuerpo a cuerpo con los dragones, de un lobo perdido en el bosque a quien una niña destripó sin razón alguna" (p.319).

It is within this context that the tactic of silence is employed. Clara first stops speaking at the age of ten, deciding "que no valía la pena hablar y se encerró en el mutismo" (p.85). Allende takes pains to emphasise that this voluntary silence is not the result of a biological or mental condition, but rather the expression of a refractory assertion of self-will. Clara is to resort to this tactic on various occasions throughout her life; cognisant of "las ventajas del silencio" (p.280), she uses silence as a weapon against her husband, as a tool to disarticulate his violent authority. Nor is she alone in her approach; Jaime too realises that silence can be a commodious option; "Para evitar las peleas con su padre había adquirido el hábito del silencio y pronto descubrió que le resultaba más cómodo no hablar" (p.349), the priest employs silences in his sermons, "conocedor del efecto de un silencio incómodo" (p.16), and Amanda and Alba remain silent while under interrogation, thus manipulating the rhetoric of power and rendering male aggression, in this case torture with its ostensibly heuristic premise, absurd and inapt.

Indeed, the tactic of silence can be seen as the logical extension of the more generic theme of absence in the novel; silence considered simply as the

absence of words. Clara on several occasions utilises absence as a tool of subversion; she effectively effaces Trueba's authority by ceasing to use her married name, she removes her wedding ring, she refuses to be present at the contrived party thrown for Blanca by her father, she abandons the country property following Trueba's physical abuse of her, and finally elects the event of her own death, thus absenting herself from Trueba's control. This could be taken as the assertive inversion of the traditional female position, that of the absence of social status or public identity, and the generalised absence of power. In this sense, the tactics which Clara employs are advocated as an affirmative response to the Latin American female condition. However, Clara's tactics, "su tendencia a evadir la realidad" (p.147) and so on, are negotiated on a purely subjective, individual level. On a collective and social level, her actions never challenge the dialectics of the sexual economy. Through failing to engage with the social issues and injustices of gender, her responses remain essentially passive, as this quotation makes clear: "Tenía la idea de que al poner nombre a los problemas, éstos se materializan y ya no es posible ignorarlos; en cambio, si se mantienen en el limbo de las palabras no dichas, pueden desaparecer solos, con el transcurso del tiempo" (p.182). It is only through assuming an active and even militant role outwith the domestic context that restrictive gender conventions are likely to change; a role which befalls Alba, a figure who, as her name suggests, represents the dawning of a new configuration of gender relations.

## **THE BODY POLITIC**

The concatenation of female subjects in *La Casa de los Espíritus* reflects the development of a feminist consciousness within the generic Latin American context; beginning with Nívea, who fulfills the traditional role of dutiful wife and mother. Ostensibly, she complies with the prevalent social praxes, supporting her husband in his political aspirations and producing a large progeny to continue his name. Her domestic affairs are also concordant with her class-status, in that she employs domestic female servants. Yet Nívea is also a recalcitrant figure. She tacitly rejects the institutionalised patriarchal authority of the Church, suffering the resultant social ostracism, and accompanies her husband to mass with the object of increasing his visibility, which will ultimately serve her own subversive intentions: "acompañaba a su marido en sus ambiciones parlamentarias, en la esperanza de que si él ocupaba un puesto en el Congreso, ella podría obtener el voto femenino, por el cual luchaba desde hacía diez años" (p.13). Indeed, her political campaigns are responsible for raising a feminist awareness, to such an

extent that on her death she is considered "para entonces la primera feminista del país" (p.133). She is symbolically seen to challenge the conventions of the male tradition in her destruction of the tree which has served as the site of a male initiation ritual for generations, denouncing and curtailing "esa bárbara tradición" (p.92). Yet her charitable impulses towards the subaltern and the well-intentioned rhetoric with which she addresses oppressed female workers fail to resonate on any more than a superficial level, a fact clearly perceived by Clara. As has already been mentioned, Clara too fails to engage successfully with the social issues of feminism, largely restricting her defiance of patriarchal hegemony to the domestic context. Although she willingly gives aid and support to the needy, and comprehends the nature of social injustice ("Esto sirve para tranquilizarnos la conciencia, hija,...Pero no ayuda a los pobres. No necesitan caridad, sino justicia" [p.148]) she seems resigned to such inequities as the expression of an immutable social order from which she wilfully detaches herself. In this sense her approach is contiguous with that of Blanca, whose priorities in times of socio-economic hardship are her own welfare and comfort. The character of Blanca, however, differs considerably from her predecessors in that the social reactions to her situation as a single mother are employed by Allende as an exegesis of the restrictive social mores by which the Latin American female subject is bound. But it is only in this most tenuous sense that Blanca's actions are politicised; it is made clear that she has never challenged the authority of her father ("nunca había tenido el valor de hacer frente a su padre" [p.391]) and that she is continually reluctant to establish a home with Pedro Tercero García for fear of a reduction in her own standards of living.

It is only with the induction of the socialist government that women are seen to assume a more active role in political processes. In the "poblaciones marginales" (p.365) of the city, a female collective is established, its end that of fomenting female political participation: "se habían organizado las mujeres para aprender nuevos oficios y participar, por primera vez, en la actividad política y social del país" (p.365). It is within this highly politicised environment that Alba begins to develop an awareness of political ideology, although initially this is informed by her love for Miguel rather than a sense of personal conviction. Gradually, Alba comes to incarnate the values of rebellion and resistance, providing asylum for those persecuted by the dictatorship as well as participating in protests against the corrupt political system. It is on one of these protests, while Alba is under siege with other students, that Allende chooses to highlight the corporeality of Alba as female subject; she is humiliated and ashamed when she

begins to menstruate in the midst of the university siege, resulting in her being obliged to withdraw from the protest. The occurrence of menstruation is taken by the males involved as tangible proof of women's liminal position in political participation: even amongst a group of ostensibly progressive, liberal men (the liberal beliefs of the university lecturer are emphasised) the female subject remains defined and delimited by her corporeal identity. It is this fact, of course, which is so forcibly ironised by the physical torture of Alba, Ana Díaz and Amanda. The notion of the body as a site of social inscription, upon which the principles and praxes of society converge, is awarded its most extreme expression in the case of torture by the agents of a governing military regime. The torture of these women; the miscarriage suffered by Ana Díaz as a result of the abuse and the pregnancy of Alba as a likely result of rapes by her aggressors are the culminations of a long-established ideology of femininity, which reduces females to a corporeal level and exalts their objectified status, an ideology which was evident half a century before, in the rape of Pancha García. It is therefore highly ironic that the only female in the novel to overcome this reductive ideology is the character who best exemplifies its tenets; the prostitute Tránsito Soto. The politicised locus of the female body is accentuated in the case of Tránsito Soto, who possesses perspicacious insights into the workings of society and the structures of power. This character posits a double threat to the established order, undermining both patriarchal authority with her manipulation of the sexual economy (her use of the body as a commodity, a currency) and capitalist hegemony with her communistic tendencies (her co-operative of workers in which "nadie...se siente explotado" [p.331]). Yet it is she who is successful in negotiating the relations of power; ultimately the only figure able to save Alba from a sure death. Tránsito Soto is seen to convert her position of marginality (reinforced by her position as a peripheral character within the narrative) to a position of autonomy and power, a conversion which no other female character is successfully able to make. Alba herself is merely able to transcend her circumstances of oppression, through the medium of writing.

### **THE THEME OF WRITING**

The motives for writing presented in *La Casa de los Espíritus* are modified according to the contexts in which the characters find themselves, yet the act of writing is consistently depicted as affirmative, constructive and even conciliatory.

Although it is Trueba's idea to write the family history (a fact which reveals his appropriation of Clara's techniques, as well as his need for expiation) the narrative remains at all times a femino-centric account. The narrative strategies employed are seen to possess a certain correspondence with the female protagonists themselves; a strategy frequently used is that of alluding to events destined to occur in the future, a technique which mirrors Clara's predictive powers, while the latter part of the text concerns itself more with social, communal issues, a preoccupation shared by Alba, the last of the female relatives.

The narrator indicates on both the first and last page of the text that her purpose in writing is that of "sobrevivir a mi propio espanto" (p.11). It is perhaps this desire for survival which is the most dominant motive for writing; personal survival, the survival of a collective memory and the survival of a social testimony preserved for posterity. Both Clara and Alba resort to writing as a means of survival, indeed, Clara's recording of events in her notebooks could be seen as a tactic employed to enable her to endure life with Trueba, while Alba's mentally transcribing the events of her life, inspired by the spirit of Clara, functions as a means of evading a pernicious reality: "escribir con el pensamiento, sin lápiz ni papel, para mantener la mente ocupada, evadirse de la perrera y vivir" (p.434). Escapism too is a motive, particularly in the case of Blanca, who writes letters to her mother while separated from her as a way of "jugar con la ilusión de que todavía estaba con su familia y que su matrimonio era sólo un mal sueño" (p.232). From this mode of escapism comes the notion of writing as an anodyne solution; as, for instance, when Trueba undertakes to write of Clara's death - "No puedo hablar de eso. Pero intentaré escribirlo" (p.307) - as a way to exorcise his own grief.

The subversive potential of writing is also acknowledged. Literary expression is deemed particularly threatening, evinced by the regime's treatment of 'el Poeta', accorded a generic name to symbolise the generalised persecution of artistic expression: "Poco a poco el funeral del Poeta se convirtió en el acto simbólico de enterrar la libertad" (p.407). The notion of freedom, of course, is partly construed on the principles of liberty of expression, a privilege revoked under the military regime. Within this context, the act of writing becomes a fiercely politicised activity: "Cualquier intento de escribir mensajes políticos en la vía pública era penado con una ráfaga de ametralladora en el sitio" (p.400). The official discourse inscribes itself insidiously on social consciousness, suppressing historical facts, prohibiting certain words and effacing all published material which

contradicts or undermines the regime. Thus 'writing' becomes a tool of power wielded by the government itself: "De una plumada, los militares cambiaron la historia, borrando los episodios, las ideologías y los personajes que el régimen desaprobaba" (p.402). It is the desire to correct such an erroneous version of history which informs Alba's commitment to write her family history. Her document is an attempt to reinscribe the relations of power and to re-write the official discourse, and can therefore be seen as both testimonial and inherently didactic. Writing is shown to be intrinsically linked to a sense of subjective identity, particularly in the case of women. Clara's childhood muteness serves as a metaphor for this; to obviate her silence, she appropriates a slate on which she transcribes her thoughts and opinions. The recourse to writing as a way of achieving a voice is thus ancestrally established. As the narrative is reconstructed so too is the identity of the narrator; an extension of Cixous' idea of 'writing the body', the act of writing becomes a fundamental means of reconstituting a fractured individual and social identity.

## CONCLUSION

The tone on which *La Casa de los Espíritus* concludes is an ambiguous one. There is certainly no utopic vision of the future projected, but neither is Alba, the narrator, resigned to a future in which political and sexual repression dominate. Indeed, it is the values of solidarity and feminist liberation which are stressed in the closing parts of the narrative, reified in the community of women who support Alba in the concentration camp and the solitary woman of the 'barrio' who rescues Alba from the rubbish tip, openly flouting the regime's authority.

Yet the omens are only ostensibly propitious. Trueba has been both physically and metaphorically reduced (his shrinking is adduced at various points throughout the novel) and has found himself constructing a mausoleum in which his corpse will be housed, in direct contrast to the "gran casa de la esquina" (p.106) which was to glorify androcentric principles. He finally re-appropriates the land which he has dominated and exploited for decades, significantly accorded a female name ('Las Tres Marías'), but finds it in a dilapidated condition and no longer economically viable. Trueba himself is forced to acknowledge his status as "un pobre viejo destrozado" (p.441).

However, although Trueba has been reduced in status, the violent authority which he once wielded has merely been displaced to the new agents of

fascist and sexual ideology, the military government. Moreover, the narrative repeatedly insinuates a conception of history as an interminable cycle of oppression; the García lineage whose members all bear the same name, indicating the unquestioning reproduction of static values, the presages throughout the text of a catastrophic turn of events (the priest's predictions of an earthly inferno, and the earthquake in which "no quedó familia que no tuviera alguien a quien llorar" [p.175]), the atavistic impulses of many of the characters, and the circular structure of the novel itself. Nor is there any means of eluding the fissured social context; it is made clear that individual members of society inevitably internalise external conditions ("el país se dividió en dos bandos irreconciliables y la división comenzó a extenderse entre todas las familias" [p.360]), resulting in "el estado de guerra interna" (p.402) which Alba attempts to resolve through the composition of narrative. It is in this very act of reconstituting a narrative that the greatest sign for hope is found - through the use of myth and magic, Alba recovers a sense of a collective identity; re-evaluating history and regenerating a sense of community. Ultimately, this is achieved through confronting and acknowledging ancestral faults as well as ancestral complicity, perhaps the most important message for modern Chilean society as it struggles to construct a coherent, collective identity.

## NOTES: CHAPTER ONE - *LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS*

1. In an interview with Michael Moody, Isabel Allende explains her decision not to name the Latin American country in which the events of the novel take place in the following terms: "En el libro nunca digo que es Chile porque quiero moverme libremente en la ficción", *Hispania*, 1986, Vol.69, No.1, p.151
2. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *La Casa de los Espíritus*, Barcelona, Plaza Y Janés, 1998.
3. See page 134 of *La Casa de los Espíritus* where Férula flouts Esteban's wishes not to inform Clara of the death of her parents, awaiting Esteban's departure in order to help Clara in her search.
4. This same essentialistic approach is found in Trueba's view of women; his male children are sent to boarding school to make them men, whereas "Las mujeres, en cambio, nacían con su condición incorporada genéticamente y no tenían necesidad de adquirirla con los avatares de la vida" (*ibid.*, p.140).
5. On seeing his sister Pancha being abused by Trueba, Pedro Segundo García "agachaba la cabeza y callaba" (*ibid.*, p.73); on page 178 he is described as "Ese hombre leal y silencioso", and even in the face of his son's probable murder at the hands of Trueba, he remains reticent: "no dijo ni una sola palabra" (*ibid.*, p.213).
6. I borrow this term from Patricia Hart - see "Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende", New York, Crambery, 1989

## CHAPTER TWO: *EVA LUNA*

### INTRODUCTION

*Eva Luna*, first published in 1991, breaks with the pattern established in Allende's first two novels, *La Casa de los Espíritus* and *De Amor Y De Sombra*, in that the socio-political context of the novel is generically Latin American rather than specifically Chilean. *Eva Luna*, appearing after the 1989 plebiscite, is the first of Allende's novels not to be written under conditions of exile, and is on the whole a more hopeful and positive novel than her previous work. It delineates the vicissitudes in the life of the eponymous protagonist, who recounts the story of her life together with that of Rolf Carlé, an immigrant, in a dualistic, alternating discourse which culminates in the characters' romantic encounter. The narrative marries elements of reality and fiction, creating a protean account which documents the recovery of a female identity; presented as displaced, marginalised and peripatetic. As in *La Casa de los Espíritus*, the act of writing, of documenting, and of inscribing a subjective history is central to the task of reconstructing a sense of identity and is once again aligned with subversive principles which impugn the validity of the univocal official discourse. Allende appropriates the picaresque model in this novel, together with her common techniques of magic realism, the use of myth and a strong metafictional propensity.

I intend to look only briefly at this novel, following on from several of the key thematic concerns previously considered in the section on *La Casa de los Espíritus*; the first of which is the relevance of the micro-relations of power and gender in the portrayal of the characters.

### ENGENDERING CHARACTERS

Informing the gendered relations of power of the characters of *Eva Luna* is the constantly repressive socio-political context of a Latin American country which is never identified, effectively creating a generic symbol of the Latin American condition. A further effect is that of universalisation; undergirded also by the interpolation of the history of the Carlé family, situated in Austria and subject to the violence and terror of the Second World War.

Under the intransigent and often despotic rule of military government, the

female characters of *Eva Luna* are presented as accordingly impotent and marginalised; subject to the control of an interminable series of 'patrones'. Consuelo, Eva's mother, is the first female character to represent this role; a "mujer callada" (p.18 <sup>11</sup>), she leads a cloistered existence first within the confines of a convent (where the actions of the singularly female community are determined by an intangible male authority: "Dios era una presencia totalitaria" [p.15]) and later in the house of a solitary professor, who is ascribed a "disciplina despótica" (p.28). As a narrative construct, Consuelo is doomed to obfuscation and eventual effacement; characterised as a shadow fading into the background "como si no existiera" (p.27), her death is premature and is brought about by a suitably fatuous cause. The character of Consuelo is mirrored by that of Rolf Carlé's mother, subjugated by the will of her tyrannical husband Lukas. It is significant that this character is never awarded an individual subjective identity. She is referred to merely as the 'esposa' or 'madre' and therefore delineated solely according to her domestic function. The routine sexual abasement which she receives at the hands of her husband leads ultimately to her experiencing a form of self-estrangement, withdrawing into a pernicious dialogue with the self which constitutes a form of escapist retreat: "Pareció encogerse y se volvió hacia adentro en un diálogo obsesivo consigo misma" (p.42). This active withdrawal from an unpleasant reality is replicated in several of the other female characters; la Madrina's descent into madness and later attempt at suicide, Elvira's morbid obsession with encasing herself in her own coffin, Eva's recourse to story-telling, and Zulema's melancholic disengagement from quotidian concerns which allows her to "huir de las pequeñas responsabilidades fastidiosas de su casa, de su matrimonio, de sí misma" (p.175). Epitomising this condition, of course, is Zulema's eventual suicide, an option she elects as a means of circumventing her miserable state within an arranged marriage.

The sexual repression by which women are bound is symbolically represented on several occasions throughout the novel, for instance, by the female factory workers who are compelled to tie back their long hair, or the vaginal suturation which la Madrina voluntarily undergoes and which she wishes to perpetrate on Eva (connoting a sutured female identity). Women themselves are shown to be agents of repression, or at the very least compliant in their own subjugation. The figure of la Madrina exemplifies this trait, greeting the birth of Eva with the remark "Mala cosa, es hembra" (p.26) and attempting to inculcate Eva with values which reinforce a female sense of inferiority: "Sostenía que es mejor ser varón, porque hasta el más mísero tiene su propia mujer a quien

mandar" (p.48). While such statements may reflect the character's acute awareness of the imperatives of power, la Madrina's response to such inequalities is invariably resignatory. Her sole expression of power is that of embroiling Eva in the same life of domestic servitude which she herself has experienced.

The novel also presents several female characters who are seen to be sexually assertive. Their fates are ambivalent; la Señora, a madam, is ultimately forced to flee the country, Zulema commits suicide following her seduction of Kamal, the 'primas' of Rolf Carlé, who are undoubtedly the most sexually solicitous characters, go on to lead seemingly happy lives as married women, while Eva herself, who takes the initiative in sexual relationships, ultimately finds both emotional and sexual fulfillment in the figure of Rolf Carlé. Allende depicts the character of Eva as a generic female subject, limiting any descriptions of her physical features to vague and generalised allusions. The female subject is thus not defined as a corporeal entity, a fact which negates the reductive objectification of women to a merely physical level. Eva's very name denotes a generic female subject - assigned, significantly, by her mother, the name 'Eva' represents a universalised womanhood, while even the validity of the paternal surname 'Luna' is subverted by lunar associations with femininity. Yet the character of Eva is not a feminist paradigm. In a certain sense, she embodies feminist values in that she is in a constant state of rebellion against the social inequalities of gender and power, defying the authority of her 'patrones', engaging herself in active political resistance and developing her ideals towards a feminist consciousness: "nosotras debíamos contribuir a la lucha, pero estábamos excluidas de las decisiones y del poder...hay que pelear siempre...la mía es una guerra cuyo final no se vislumbra" (p.218). However, although the character is often refractory to the commodities of gender and power, she remains bound not only by patriarchal convention but by her own romanticised notions of love and equality. Although she possesses a resilience of character and a resourcefulness of spirit, on most occasions throughout the novel it is not she but rather convenient male characters who rescue her from detrimental situations, reified by Riad Halabí's securing for her a document which accords her an official identity.

Finally, the narrative itself could be said to comprise a feminist vision of gender relations, in that it seems to propose an androgynous conception of both characters and text. The transsexual figure of Melecio/ Mimi is the obvious personification of this apprehension, but androgynous elements can also be found in other characters; notably Rolf Carlé, whose work involves the typically

masculine preoccupation of *looking* (he is a cameraman in war-zones), yet who possesses such a sensitive character that his father resolves to excise it physically from his son's personality, and Riad Halabí, who embodies the stereotypically female values of community and who "renunció a la orden paterna de hacerse rico" (p.135). This fusion of apparently contradictory elements is also mirrored textually in the synthesis of the alternating chapters, a reconciliation which is perhaps necessary given the condition of estrangement and exile prevalent throughout the novel.

## THE CONDITION OF EXILE

The condition of exile - both in the sense of a physical displacement and an ontological alienation - is consistently presented in *Eva Luna* as a universal phenomenon, and is one which is appropriated by Allende to foreground the female condition. Typically, the social context in which characters are inserted is one with which they are seen to be in perpetual conflict, whether this be the military despotism of the Latin American referent, the Second World War or even the context of religious persecution in Israel. This portrayal of the individual as antagonistic to society is consonant with the characterisation of novels written in exile which is proposed by Carmen J. Galarce; of such novels she writes: "Son más 'realistas' y articulan directamente los conflictos internos de los héroes con los conflictos de la sociedad que los nutre" <sup>(2)</sup>. In *Eva Luna* the conflictual dialectic converges upon issues of race, class and gender. The individual experiences the disarticulation of a coherent identity, an existential crisis which derives in part from the loss of faith in social institutions; the Church, the home, the family, and above all, the government. The novel presents each of these institutions as inherently flawed, as evinced in the repressive nature of the Church doctrine espoused in the convent; the house, the first 'home' where Eva grows up, which is peopled with corpses (and the institutionalised violence evident in the Carlé family home); the lack of any family model other than that of Rolf's aunt and uncle, the validity of which is constantly undermined by his cousins' sexual antics; and the erratic and corrupt nature of the national government, which passes through dictatorships, popular revolts, military coups and democracies. (These governmental fluctuations are seen to be mirrored in the lives of the country's subjects.)

The corollary of the individual's conflict with society is the displacement and wilful exclusion of the individual, resulting in a deracinated sense of

subjectivity. This condition is personified by the itinerant character of Eva; incarnating "la sensación de orfandad" (p.126), her ontological estrangement is only resolved through the character's actively assuming control of her own identity. This is achieved through the medium of writing and through her construction of an alternative 'reality' in which she accords herself a veritable range of family members.<sup>(3)</sup> Eva's successful management of her exiled condition is counterbalanced by the account of Zulema, who, having emigrated to the South American country, refuses to learn the new language or indeed participate in the life of the community. (This character is also the antithesis to Riad Halabí, who integrates himself into society so successfully that he attends the local Christian church in the absence of any mosque.) By refusing to adapt to her new circumstances, Zulema is effectively denying her own subjectivity, perpetuating her status as an object displaced from her own country. This objectified status is in fact emphasised in the narrative; Zulema is referred to as "un enorme juguete" (p.147); "una especie de enorme vegetal" (p.159).

Exile as a metaphor for the female condition is also evoked at various points throughout the novel. Although Eva is never forced to flee her own country, her nomadic, anonymous, deracinated identity is taken as the representation of the exiled subject, and as such comes to symbolise the female subject's quest to recover an identity. Her marginal status is epitomised by her lack of official certification, a condition she describes as being "como si no hubiera nacido" (p.150). The sense of double exile<sup>(4)</sup>, the additional disadvantage of being a female within a patriarchal system, is shown to have a historical precedent; there are repeated references to the cyclical nature of Eva's condition, accentuating her role as a female archetype: "Tuve la sensación de haber vivido antes ese mismo desamparo" (p.108); "tenía la impresión de haber vivido varias vidas" (p.268).

## CONCLUSION

The narrative of *Eva Luna* privileges the voice of the female subject, creating a text which strives to construct a cohesive female identity. As in *La Casa de los Espíritus*, the recourse to myth and popular tradition is employed as a means of recovering a collective historical memory, the most obvious example of which is the story of Eva's conception. This account is a barely-dissembled version of the creation myth which conflates elements of the Biblical story; involving the snake, the father whose occupation is that of a gardener, and the professor's house which is described as "esa casa que le pareció el paraíso" (p.17). The entire

narrative possesses a strong parodic quality, in part due to the thematic insistence on the dichotomy of appearance and reality. Several of the characters construct their own alternative version of circumstances; Consuelo invents her own personal history ("pero seguro que ésa es una leyenda que inventó con posterioridad" [p.10]), Eva constantly moulds the external reality to suit her own subjective purposes ("Una palabra mía y, ¡chas!, se transformaba la realidad" [p.30]), while society itself often seems confronted with a duplicitous verisimilitude, exemplified by the limited version of truth presented under government censorship. Yet the verisimilitude of the official discourse comes to possess an intrinsic legitimacy; the fallacious account of a massacre acquires validity simply through repetition: "y repitieron la patraña tantas veces, que acababan por creerla ellos mismos" (p.246). It is within this context of ambiguities that Eva develops her gift for story-telling. Although her talent is deprecated by Huberto Naranjo, who sees story-telling as an exclusively female conceit, Eva's talent and ultimate profession is elected by Allende for symbolic purposes within a context in which the word is esteemed an instrument of power. Thus Eva's appropriation of language is in fact a form of self-empowerment: "me atrajo la idea de ser yo también uno más de la historia y tener el poder de determinar mi fin o inventarme una vida" (p.236). Naranjo too comes to realise the influence of words, recognising that "la guerra tenía más palabras que balas" (p.172), a statement which is also pertinent to the 'war' being waged between the genders ("la mía es una guerra cuyo final no se vislumbra" [p.218]). Various instances of words being deployed as instruments of power are presented in the novel; for example, the saccharine soap-operas which maintain women (who are depicted as the most avid viewers) in a state of intellectual subordination, or the romantic novels which women are encouraged to read, in which the heroine is invariably a virgin and the superiority of the man is axiomatic. Allende subverts this tradition by making writing Eva's profession, enabling her to achieve the financial independence which she realises is essential for her emancipation. Writing is also shown to be inherent to her sense of identity, an activity by which she is defined. It acquires a further subversive undertone by Allende's investing Eva's appropriation and manipulation of words with a flagrant eroticism ("tomé una hoja de papel limpia y blanca, como una sábana recién planchada para hacer el amor" [p.234]) and later by making Eva's 'folletín' politically informative, thereby transgressing the normative boundaries of female writing as well as subverting the official discourse. The self-invalidating conclusion of the novel ("O tal vez las cosas no ocurrieron así" [p.285]) can be read as a deconstructive mechanism which dismantles hierarchies of power. Eva's unique condition within the narrative ("me sentía la protagonista de una tragedia"

[p.216]) is not merely a metafictional gimmick, but a means employed by Allende to symbolise Eva's status as a metonym for a generic Latin American identity; one constructed through a multiplicitous alterity: "transformada en un ser disperso, reproducida hasta el infinito, viendo mi propio reflejo en múltiples espejos" (p.278).

**NOTES: CHAPTER TWO - *EVA LUNA***

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *Eva Luna*, Barcelona, Plaza Y Janés, 1998.
2. See *La Novela Chilena de Exilio* by Carmen J. Galarce, (Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 1993) p.46
3. Eva states that Professor Jones takes on the status of a grandfather to her, Elvira appears "como una abuela benigna" (*Eva Luna*, p.102), Mimi becomes a sisterly companion while Eva "amaba a Riad Halabí como a un padre" (*ibid.*, p.146).
4. Carmen J. Galarce has also made this point; see *La Novela Chilena de Exilio*, (Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 1993) p.162

**II**

**DIAMELA ELTIT**

## INTRODUCTION

As an artist who elected to remain within Chile following the coup, Diamela Eltit, born in Santiago in 1949, participated in the literary scene of 'la avanzada', a cultural movement of resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, and formed part of the 1980 post-coup literary generation. A vociferous opponent of the regime, she was a founder of CADA (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte), an activist vanguardist group, and was known within Chile for her work as a performance and video artist. In addition to her novelistic production, she has also written various articles and essays, as well as having collaborated on a photographic publication with the artist Lotty Rosenfeld.

Eltit's work can be situated firmly within the postmodernist aesthetic, characterised by centrifugal imperatives which she herself defines as "una inclinación, una obsesión y una cercanía al espacio marginal" <sup>(1)</sup>. The thematic preoccupations of her novels converge upon the disunity of the subject, the 'disidentity' engendered under a repressive regime, the microstructure of the family unit, the rehearsal of spaces and the multiplicitous semantic resonances of the body, which is at all times held to be a site of social inscription: "el cuerpo es un territorio moral donde ensayan su eficacia o su fracaso los sistemas del poder" <sup>(2)</sup>. The body is the locus of a confluence of social mores and axioms, a multiple signifier which is shown to reproduce the aberrations and contradictions of the external context.

Eltit's work problematises conventional narrative praxes; informed by ludic, visceral compulsions which find expression in an experimental and rupturist discourse. Such a non-mimetic style of narrative is the corollary of Eltit's desire to "poner una escritura en algo refractoria a la comodidad, a los signos confortables" <sup>(3)</sup>. Central to this conception of literature is the role and influence of language itself; the literary artefact becomes a subversive tool of power, a contestatory instrument with which to dismantle hegemonic paradigms: "Sigo pensando lo literario más bien como una disyuntiva que como una zona de respuestas que dejen felices y contentos a los lectores" <sup>(4)</sup>.

I wish first to examine Eltit's seminal novel *Lumpérica*, before moving on to discuss her later work; the novels *El Cuarto Mundo*, *Vaca Sagrada* and *Los Vigilantes*.

**NOTES: DIAMELA ELTIT**

1. See the BBC2 series 'Made in Latin America: Love and Power', first televised in March 1990.
2. See interview by Ana María Larraín, "El Cuerpo Femenino Es Un Territorio Moral", *Revista de Libros*, Santiago, 'El Mercurio', no.4, 1992
3. See *Una Poética de Literatura Menor: La Narrativa de Diamela Eltit*, ed. Juan Carlos Lértora, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1993, p. 21
4. *Ibid.*, p.21

## CHAPTER THREE: *LUMPÉRICA*

### INTRODUCTION

First published in 1983, *Lumpérica* is a vanguardist, audacious indictment of post-coup Chilean society, although the events and circumstances of the military dictatorship are never specifically mentioned. The novel's title, a neologism, is most often taken to be the conflation of the term 'lumpen' with 'América', however, Eltit herself has stated that her intention had been simply to devise a term which would denote 'la' lumpen, a lumpen female subject. The novel documents events which transpire throughout the course of a single night within an anonymous plaza in Santiago de Chile; its protagonist a female vagrant accorded the deliberately recondite name of L.Illuminada. The text also depicts the interrogation scene of an unidentified male subject, an exploration of the graffiti of the plaza and a metatextual reflection on the author/ protagonist/ text relationship. Subverting (and inverting) the conventional narrative praxes of plot, chronology and the authority of the omniscient narrator/ implied author, *Lumpérica* instead strives towards the model of the autonomous text, where identities conflate, dissipate and are finally conceded as arbitrary.

It is ironic that *Lumpérica*, a novel which considers the existence of the marginalised in society (before its publication the novel was given a public reading by its author in a Chilean brothel) has remained something of a marginalised text itself. The novel's easy passage through the censor's office only served to bolster the charges of cryptic hermeticism made against it by literary critics, charges which result from the ludic manipulation of language, baroque wordplay and anaphoric repetition of key themes inherent to the text. Yet the impact of the novel for the reader derives precisely from its multiplicity and mutability; in effect the reader must construct and apprehend the novel as a protean, semantic kaleidoscope.

*Lumpérica* is composed of ten chapters, of which only four are titled. A wide range of narrative strategies are employed, including the recourse to differing styles of font, modes of discourse and the insertion of a photograph of the author herself, while various cinematic, poetic, prosaic and performance techniques are also appropriated. The unifying theme, however, is the disruption and rupture of language and identity - revealed to be precariously interdependent - evinced through lexical and syntactical disintegration. The non-linear structure of

the novel's ten chapters also reinforces the impression of a fragmentary narrative in crisis.

I wish to consider several themes of the novel, the first of which is the depiction of the protagonist, L.Illuminada.

## L. ILUMINADA

L.Illuminada can be seen as the putative protagonist of *Lumpérica*, for the 'real' protagonist is most often the novel itself. Nevertheless, it is her disquieting, erratic and recalcitrant figure who lends the text the degree of cohesion it might otherwise lack; introduced in the first sentence, "Lo que resta de este anochecer será un festín para L.Illuminada" (p.9 <sup>11</sup>), the antics, performances and lucubrations of this character inform a large part of the text's thematic discourse.

The genericness of the name 'L.Illuminada' is textually and symbolically expedient if the character is to serve as the metonym of a whole country, and, indeed, continent. The novel begins with the loss of the character's subjective identity; "después de haber perdido el nombre propio" (p.11), a loss which is necessary in order to allow the assumption of the collective social identity. Thus the appellations subsequently attributed to the character of L.Illuminada are accordingly multifarious (although not necessarily apposite): "Cada uno de sus nombres es desmentido por su facha" (p.12). There are resonances in the character of L.Illuminada with the figure of Christ; she too undergoes a baptism (beneath the neon light of the sign) and finds herself obliged to "perder su costra personal para renacer lampiña" (p.10) in an act of immolation for the collective good. Like Christ, she occupies for the vagrants of the plaza the status of messiah or preacher; "Es que ella transmitirá la noticia, como predicadora" (p.17), and throughout the novel the only words which she ever enunciates are those which Christ is recorded to have uttered on the Cross: " - tengo sed - " (p.19). Both marginal figures, the "discurso cifrado" (p.23) adopted by L.Illuminada could be compared with the codified (and inherently subversive) nature of Christ's parables, while her tracing of words in chalk on the ground of the plaza is reminiscent of Christ's tracing the outline of a fish in sand; both communications are transient and easily effaced.

The 'luminoso', the neon advertisement sign which confers L.Illuminada's new identity at the beginning of the novel, is employed by Eltit to symbolise the

Law of the Father; it is an omniscient eye occupying an elevated position on the top of a building. A passive entity as she sits in the public plaza, L.Illuminada's new name also denotes passivity; she is illuminated by an external agent to whose authority she (initially) willingly submits: "por voluntad propia está presta para el control del luminoso" (p.21). The body of the subject has the status of a mere repository; under the aegis of the flickering sign L.Illuminada is "subyugada" (p.212), receiving the socio-cultural values and imperatives transmitted by the sign (not least of which is the commercialisation of the female body). Yet if the body is to be taken as a social metaphor, as an inscription of socio-cultural exigencies, the body is also the supreme locus of significance. By the final chapter, L.Illuminada has come to embrace the arbitrary, diverse nature of the 'messages' projected onto her body - the fact that these messages allow a diverse range of hermeneutic possibilities makes the subject's body the literal embodiment of multiplicity: "Unas líneas rojas cruzaban su vestido...allí estaban los grafismos que aceptaban más de una interpretación. Cada uno de ellos contenía más de una letra" (p.215). By voluntarily embracing this performance of multiplicity, L.Illuminada not only inverts the Law of the Father whereby the female body is a frequently exploited economic commodity, but she actuates a means of defying the univocal, monolithic expression of the established order in which only one version of reality or 'truth' can ever be pronounced.

Throughout the text, the body is subjected to burns, lacerations, excessive cold and even metamorphosis. If the body, the physical designation of identity, is in crisis (on the first page of the novel L.Illuminada's face is described as a "rostro a pedazos" [p.9], while in the fourth chapter she is trepanned and her body a mere "espacio corporal corrompido" [p.86]), the subjective integrity of the self is consequently also disrupted. Yet Eltit establishes a further dialectic; on many occasions the somatic entity is synonymous with that of the word, the page, or the entire literary text. L.Illuminada is the epitome of this correlation, for instance, on burning her hand in the plaza the narrator defines the scene as "quemada y palabra como unidad" (p.39), and in the penultimate chapter L.Illuminada's body in fact manifests the physical symptoms of words themselves; she is "(torcida de palabras definitivas)" (p.184). Besides the clearly subversive premise of the identification of a female body with linguistic expression (the patent gender inversion of the 'Word Made Flesh' trope) an even more significant consequence of the body/ word dialectic emerges. Given the demonstrated reciprocity of the two, and the evident crisis of the body, the corollary of the disruption of language seems inevitable. Thus all of L.Illuminada's attempts to articulate successfully meet with a fatalistic

sense of failure; her "necesidad de expresión" (p.38) stifled in stammering, "Para él que la mira es un espectáculo desolador porque balbucea" (p.12), wilful silence, "Parece más bien una muda" (p.38), inane mimicry, "Muge y relincha copia esos sonidos"(p.62), enforced silence, "con la lengua rota e hinchada" (p.86), and the regression to fatuity; "Asumió la retórica del acertijo" (p.109). Even her efforts to communicate through the written word are frustrated. Although she tentatively inscribes her message in the plaza, the public forum traditionally dominated by males; "empieza a construir grandes letras que abarcan todo el centro de la plaza" (p.122), she writes with a transitory material and eventually participates in what is effectively her own effacement, assisting the vagrants in erasing her words, "sumisa" (p.123).

Symbolising an individual who has been subjected to the ineffable experience of torture (the oppressive atmosphere of the military regime is evoked constantly throughout the novel), L.Illuminada exhibits the resultant phenomenon of estrangement from the self; the mutilation and dislocation of the enunciating subject: "& habla/ pero ninguna palabra es acorde con sus gestos" (p.187). Perhaps a further effect of the experience of torture is that of self-objectification, a process to which L.Illuminada often has recourse. Erratic, erotic and tawdry, she indulges in narcissistic performances, "por el puro placer del espectáculo" (p.10), cultivating the voyeurism of the vagrants and embracing the cult of "la plasticidad de la mirada" (p.15). Enacting her role in the centre of the plaza, effecting the self-inflicted wounds on her body and later, too, scrutinising herself in her mirror, she becomes simultaneously subject and object. This is a subtle means of defying and thwarting the torturer's prerogative; as the subject begins to anticipate the harm to be inflicted, it initiates the objectification of itself, thereby creating a wounded effigy of itself and thus, effectively, obviating and negating the torturer's authority. Eltit employs the image of the cinematographic camera in *Lumpérica* as the metaphor of the violating agent; as L.Illuminada executes her "primera toma filmica" (p.15), it is clear that the word 'toma' has a further resonance which is particularly pertinent. The use of the camera also introduces the sexualised concept of the gaze; simultaneously subject and object, L. Illuminada's behaviour inverts the traditionally male privilege of being the subject who contemplates the object, for while she assumes a variety of poses ("gemiría a la vez todas las poses" [p.118]), she is instated in the public domain with a degree of autonomy: "todo ese espacio que le pertenece" (p.69). Her recourse to self-objectification becomes a defiant means of resolving the recurrent "antagonismo entre el observador y lo observado" (p.213).

## THE PLAZA

The plaza in Santiago de Chile where the 'plot' of *Lumpérica* takes place is a rather ambivalent deictic marker, for although the action is contextualised in a specifically-named city, the plaza itself remains anonymous, a sombre emblem of Chilean and Latin American life. The image of the plaza suggests a place of encounter, a syncretic locus or social interstice where the collective energies of the city converge. Yet the plaza of *Lumpérica*, "lo único no ficticio de todo este invento" (p.26), is instead an arrested site, a delirium-producing post-modern scenario. Devoid of any constructive sense of community, it has become a desolate place; "objeto único e inhabitado" (p.120), the spurious adornment of "una aparente civilidad" (p.193), with the incessant, baleful glare of the neon sign turning "toda la plaza...amenazante" (p.36). It is a locus of circumscribed, rigid homogeneity, ("monocorde la mente en la plaza" [p.30]), where the dominant tone is grey and the restrictive authoritarian power achieves its most public expression ("patrullas que vigilan las calles" [p.209]). It is for this reason that seemingly innocuous objects acquire a heightened significance (the cables, for example, are "una referencia más de los límites de la plaza" [p.209]), and the interrogated man's insistence on the prosaic utility of the public plaza is impugned.

As the light of the neon sign confers new identities at random on the vagrants, the plaza itself becomes the crucible for a ritualised performance of affects, a stage on which urban semantics and social artifice are ceremonially rehearsed. The narrator even highlights for the reader the plaza's status as a privileged site, asking rhetorically (and ironically) "¿Dónde fuera de la plaza se obtendría ese privilegio?" (p.21). The plaza's phantasmagoric appearance at night, in the neon haze of the lights, intensifies the impression that it is "un espacio para la representación" (p.50) where the quotidian commonplaces of social interaction must conform to a pre-written script and every word must be modified, "rehacerse en otro espacio con la plaza como telón" (p.41). The scenario of inauthenticity which the plaza now presents makes its sacralisation - "El sacramento en la plaza, la borradura del pasado" (p.27) - all the more incongruous. It is the sacrifice of authenticity which the plaza, as a sacred space, exhibits, to the point where the mere action of electing a seat on a bench is invested with theatrical artifice: "cambia de banco - madera por piedra - y se sienta en su plataforma" (p.197). It is in this sense that the vagrants, like *L. Iluminada*, are decentred subjects; having become detached from all claim to ontological authenticity, they are quite literally 'desplazados'.

If, as we have seen, the body of *L. Iluminada* is synonymous with the body of writing itself, the plaza too must assume a metonymical role, representing most often the blank page upon which *L. Iluminada* literally inscribes herself: "ella no era un adorno para la plaza sino a la inversa: la plaza era su página, sólo eso" (p.109). Thus the plaza becomes a palimpsest, upon which discrete modes of discourse are seen to converge: the official register (the signs and the patrol cars), the popular, vernacular register (the graffiti) and the corporeal and subversive (*L. Iluminada*'s chalk-writing and erotic demeanour). The denunciatory function of graffiti, the "desenfrenada proclama de la plaza" (p.115) is seen to be analogous to the corporeal discourse, revealing both body and page as refractory sites of resistance. Within this symbology, Eltit creates a game of mirrors where the inter-relationship of body/ text/ language/ literature is constantly manipulated (for instance, the curfew imposed on the inhabitants of the plaza can be read as interchangeable with the censorship imposed on the novel).

Yet if the plaza is to be taken as the page, the reader is made all too aware that the plaza is tendentious. The plaza/ page constitutes the site on which the struggle for hegemony is continually being exercised. The author acknowledges that her characters, the vagrants of the plaza, are doubly marginalised; subject to the tenets of both political and literary hegemony. The text itself is a wounded body, obliged to effect canonical conformity in the same way that the plaza's inhabitants find themselves obliged to conform to the rule of the authoritarian power: "Se acomodan como líneas ordenadas sobre la página y toda plaza los imprime y toda lluvia los entinta" (p.114). Eltit's use of the image of the fence-posts of the plaza is insightfully appropriate; literature too is the public space, wielded as a tool of domination and possessing the ability both to restrict and to exclude: "lienzos de la plaza tendidos como sus más locas frases, frases de lienzos ha dicho y dobla así la facultad de la letra" (p.192).

## TEXTUAL ARTIFICE

The entire text of *Lumpérica* is constructed on the principle of a *mise-en-abyme*, a self-referential and ludic palimpsest in which the reader must work to extricate meaning; "mirada y texto, cuerpo y mente se refrotan" (p.115). Although the ten chapters are differentiated in terms of narrative techniques, and create the effect of a polyphonic concatenation of images and sounds, *Lumpérica* converges upon the obsessive, anaphoric reiteration of the themes of language and the

metafictional treatment of the process whereby the text itself is constructed. Each chapter, scene or narrative fragment reveals itself to be merely the exegesis of the wider literary project: "Era como una escena circular ensayada una multiplicidad de veces" (p.151).

The circular motif in the novel, most obvious in its opening at dusk and conclusion at dawn, is also enhanced by Eltit's common use of metalepsis and disingenuous narrative techniques employed with the ostensible function of 'facilitating' the reading of the novel. Such techniques invariably serve only to obfuscate further its semantic relevance; in the first chapter, for instance, the narrator seeks to clarify prior statements with the use of the phrase "Para decirlo nuevamente" (p.11), yet the subsequent descriptions do little to explicate the scenario taking place. Similarly, the recourse to the expression "Por eso..." (p.18) frequently appears redundant, again, as the ensuing justification fails to elucidate the actions or thoughts previously described. The scenes and chapters of *Lumpérica* are reminiscent of the concentric circles produced on water when a stone disturbs its surface; the imbrication of falsehoods and artifice: "falsificación sobre falsificación recompuso" (p.123). Even the authenticity of the protagonist cannot be asserted: "Ella en el medio del artificio tal vez tampoco era real" (p.213). The backdrop of the novel, the plaza which "garantiza una ficción en la ciudad" (p.9), seems relentless in its promotion of the *mise-en-abyme*, to such an extent that its inhabitants are obliged to delude or 'hoodwink' literature in order to evade the self-reflexive process; L.Illuminada seeks out a spot on a bench "a plena espalda de la literatura" (p.113).

By constantly revealing (and interpreting) its own process of deconstruction, the narrative destabilises the reader, offering instead a disorientating plurality of perspectives. The narratorial voice is not consistent; although most of the text is related by a heterodiegetic narrator, at times this voice (which could also be taken as the voice of the author) becomes self-consciously intrusive, addressing the reader; "Pero volvamos" (p.35) and issuing direct appeals: "Véanlos en la ceremonia" (p.26). The intentional (con)fusion of author and protagonist also works to decentralise the text; the actions of L.Illuminada are frequently seen to be those of the text's own author: "Ha desorganizado el lenguaje" (p.38); "Ha trastocado su particular orden dificultando toda certeza" (p.197). The identification between author and protagonist is intensified by the inclusion in the body of the text of a photograph of Eltit, depicting the author after having cut and burnt her arms; actions also attributed to

L.Illuminada. In this way, Eltit is literally "writing the body" - if author and protagonist are one, and the protagonist's body has been shown to be synonymous with the text. L.Illuminada's body is able to "cobrar una autonomía especial" (p.112), clearly the same autonomy for which the text consciously strives.

The linguistic distortion which characterises much of *Lumpérica* (language "Ya no es reconocible" [p.38]) must be considered within the socio-political context to which the text subtly alludes. The anonymous commentators on the filmic process seem to be issuing a caveat to the reader with this end, the insinuation being that the context specific to Chile within a particular historical time should be recognised: "Porque alguno podría decir que nadie quemaría su propio mano por una simple mirada / ah si tú dices eso es que no sabes nada de la vida" (p.39). The text's lexically and syntactically fractured language becomes explicable and even expedient under conditions whereby "Lo contradictorio era grave" (p.148). The man undergoing interrogation exemplifies the effect of such conditions - conformity takes the form of paucity of expression; "ahorrar el máximo de palabras" (p.53) and the wilful suppression and distortion of 'the truth': "Cambió palabras, suprimió frases enteras, obvió parlamentos importantes por crearlos secundarios" (p.56). Under conditions in which certain words are censored while others are emphasised, language becomes a wholly arbitrary means of communication: "Ah, por una pura mirada, por un gesto, yo habría contado otra historia" (p.24). If the status of language is now purely arbitrary, the nature of words themselves comes to seem inherently ludic and subjective. Thus a great deal of *Lumpérica's* text derives gratuitous pleasure in the sound and form of words - this of course also evinces the female appropriation of language: "Escribió: iluminada entera, encendida" (p.144). The sexual connotations of 'encendida' are heavily implied, and indeed the association between the appropriation of language and of the body is deliberately cultivated. Autonomy in both of these areas has traditionally been restricted to males, a privilege which the linguistic onanism of certain passages of *Lumpérica* seeks to subvert. Words as denuded entities are sexually provocative; "Empieza a decir toda bella palabra hasta extasiarse" (p.109), a potent means of disrupting the tenets of logocentrism: "Rompe su modelo, se erige en capítulo" (p.109). The resultant discourse can be considered as a literal reinscription of the female body: "Se ha abierto un nuevo circuito en la literatura" (p.36). I will now examine the depiction of sexual autonomy which *Lumpérica* presents.

## SEXUAL AUTONOMY

The female subject who occupies and even monopolises the site in the public plaza is depicted as carnal, libidinous, scabrous; a figure who initiates and participates in the orgiastic rite of the vagrants and openly flaunts her autoeroticism: "frenética, mueve las caderas bajo la luz" (p.10); "el coqueteo de sus piernas abiertas" (p.111). Her promiscuity is reified in the third chapter of the novel, where the linguistic onanism I have referred to reached its consummation - Eltit invokes the image of a mare to incarnate the unbridled sexuality of her protagonist: "Está la yegua suelta" (p.68). (The imagery of this chapter is also seen to exploit further connotations of the mare symbol, namely the association of the mare as the paradigmatic reproductive entity ['brood-mare'] and the image of the female animal which man must 'domesticate' or subdue.)

By siting the character of L.Illuminada within the plaza, the public forum, Eltit flouts the public/ private dyad of patriarchal convention which relegates the female to the private state of domesticity. The public spectacle of L.Illuminada's sexual exhibitionism; "Cualquiera puede constatar sus labios entreabiertos y sus piernas extendidas" (p.9) transgresses the established conceptions of sexual and social propriety and the boundaries of the domestic realm to which women have traditionally been confined. Eltit's impugment of the validity of conventional gender categorisations is evinced through L.Illuminada's sexual conduct, which effectively posits a renunciation of the phallographic order: "desobedecería siempre el mando de las otras piernas, para dejar que sus patas marcaran un camino distinto del que la montara" (p.65). The drab, grey, amorphous garments worn by L.Illuminada, together with her hairless head (which she herself elects to shave) attest to the distinction drawn between biological sex and the artificially imposed social constructs of gender. In shearing her hair (a potent emblem of femininity) L.Illuminada symbolically severs these constructs of gender which delimit her; she remains (biologically) female, yet her gender is ambiguous. The social concept of 'femininity' is defined to a large extent by cosmetic appearance; L.Illuminada's behaviour is seen to reject the superficiality of the social edifices of power which circumscribe her: "Anuncian (proclaman) / la forma de la belleza pero se levanta ella / echando abajo sus propios edificios" (p.185).

The text of *Lumpérica* also subverts the patriarchal religious principles of Christianity; through the recourse to an iconoclastic 'alternative' discourse which desacralises the tenets of Marianism. This highly subversive alternative discourse

is most evident in the sixth chapter, where the 'official' discourse is undercut by a voice presented at the foot of the page, in simple, homoerotic statements: "y mis manos de madona abren sus piernas de madona y la lamén" (p.31). As well as alluding to the Church's role in perpetuating and enforcing patriarchal ideology, these passages comprise further alternatives to the rigid definitions of femininity prescribed by and inherent to the official patriarchal order; lesbianism and autoeroticism are presented as subversive means of defying the conventional heterosexual praxis. It is significant that L. Iluminada is never placed within the domestic context of the family which would serve as the patriarchal micro-structure, nor indeed is she depicted engaging in any heterosexual activity. (In fact, represented as a mare her renunciation of phallographic authority is made explicit: "Corcovear, temblar, expulsar de su anca a ese jinete" [p.74].) These lacunae could be taken as the tacit rejection of the axioms of essentialism (prevalent within post-coup Chilean society), which aggrandise women's position as domestic helpmates and mothers.

Perhaps the greatest transgression of the social confines of female sexuality presented by *Lumpérica* is that of the appropriation of the female body by the female subject herself. L. Iluminada's profound enjoyment of her own corporeality derives in large part from her assumed position as both subject and object of her own discourse, spurning the rhetoric which deems the two to be mutually exclusive. As a female placed within a public space, exposed to a gaze which is generically male ("los pálidos", "los desharrapados") she belies the objectified condition of the female and usurps the male prerogative of *subject* (in the final chapter she gazes at the neon sign, "inundada de placer" [p.212]). The masochistic practices in which she indulges can also be considered in this light: "se muestra en el goce de su propia herida" (p.19); "y si el dolor existe es obvio que conduce al éxtasis" (p.19) (might the word 'herida' here also function as a yonic symbol, an ironic reference to female genitalia which has traditionally been viewed as a 'wound' or a 'lack'?) In both masochistic behaviour ("víctima se inyecta/...Se clava espuela" [p.99]) and masturbation ("repite el gesto solitario...Su vello púbico en las manos" [p.112]) the female subject becomes the object - as well as the agent - of her own desire, thus neatly inverting the mechanisms of power which align the notions of 'passivity' and 'object' with the female. Masochistic practice is deployed as an extreme means of achieving the emancipation and resemanticisation of the territory of the female body, within a context which holds both the sexual and linguistic autonomy of women as transgressive and profane: "y mi cara de madona busca su boca de madona y toca interior su lengua profana"

(p.29).

## CONCLUSION

Both the injured body of *L. Iluminada* and the manipulated body of the text are metonyms of the wounded body of Chile, the socio-political context under which Eltit was obliged to produce her first novel. The self-estrangement which afflicts *L. Iluminada* ("No ve su mano que la ha alejado de sí... Descubre su brazo" [p.37]) together with the fragmentary, disconnected nature of the text can therefore be taken as symbolic of the social disjunctive in which Chile finds itself; the fact that *L. Iluminada* never recovers her subjective integrity indicative of the hurdles confronting Chile as a country. One of the central reasons for *L. Iluminada*'s loss of a cohesive identity is the lack of deictic signals provided in *Lumpérica*; no physical context outwith the confines of the plaza is available to her, the vagrants serving as her sole point of reference: "ahora construye y planifica sólo con los pálidos como referente" (p.15). This absence heightens the immediacy of *L. Iluminada*'s experiences in the plaza, but has the additional effect of depriving the reader of any sense of historical development; the past as referent is not accessible. Indeed, to participate in the plaza's rituals it would seem that the effacement of memory is imperative. *L. Iluminada* at the start of the novel displays her disengagement with all historical continuity: "Ha vaciado su mente de toda memoria" (p.14). The resultant effect appears to be one of mass docility and homogeneity ("Llegamos homogéneos/ al fin, pero distantes y sin voz" [p.137]); the populace are attenuated beings, subject to the symptoms of psychological disorientation and immobilised into a collective stasis. The narrator alludes to this displaced subjectivity in the first chapter: "Si yo misma tuve una herida, pero hoy tengo y arrastro mi propia cicatriz. Ya no me acuerdo cuánto ni cómo me dolía, pero por la cicatriz sé que me dolía" (p.19). The blank spaces on the page, recurrent throughout the text of *Lumpérica*, are representative of the suppression of this historical context, the ellipsis of memory. The recourse to the blank space appears often in 'Ensayo General', a chapter in which narrative incisions mimic corporeal ones, and where the act of cutting (severing, excising) is deployed as a metaphor for self-censorship - the entire process of literary production has become a process of excision.

With the mass homogenisation of the populace, the concept of individuality has also been expunged ("se duerme el individuo" [p.30]). The constant, urgent "refrote" of the vagrants takes on the vestiges of a kind of social

incest, in a context where discrete identities are inhibited in deference to the hegemonic paradigm ("la escasa luz...no permite definir ningún rasgo" [p.206]).

As an indication of its author's vision of Chile's future, *Lumpérica* is a revealing text. Although the last paragraphs of the novel contain references to the dawning of a new day, and the beginnings of the loosening of the homogenising mechanisms ("La gente era ahora heterogénea, mujeres, hombres, estudiantes" [p.219]) these propitious signs are belied by the insistence upon the cyclical motif which suggests the anticipated recurrence of the previous day's events, and by L.Illuminada's donning of a "collar de pedrerías" (p.218) around her neck. An earlier exploration of Chilean society in the text depicts the country as a "perra fina...perseguida por los quiltros" (p.101) and dominated by a dictatorial master: "Su señó es implacable/ el amo d'esta perra" (p.102). The 'perra' is eventually tamed, the emblem of which is the silver collar placed around its neck. The resonances of this passage with L.Illuminada's action are clear; she willingly submits to and perpetuates her own subjugation. The circular collar could be seen as an allusion to the Uroboric symbol - like the Uroborus devouring its own tail, Chilean society must recognise its complicity in its own oppression.

**NOTES: CHAPTER THREE – *LUMPÉRICA***

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *Lumpérica*, Santiago, Editorial Planeta, 1998.

## CHAPTER FOUR: *EL CUARTO MUNDO*

### INTRODUCTION

The audacious and defiant nature of *El Cuarto Mundo*, Eltit's third novel, is adumbrated by its very title, which posits a negation of hegemonic and imperialist categorisations. The inhabitants of this fourth world act out an aberrant and cloistral existence in the dystopia of what is ironically referred to as "la nación más poderosa del mundo" (p.127<sup>11</sup>). In her depiction of these distorted lumpen figures, Eltit offers what is perhaps the most disquieting portrayal of marginalisation and desocialisation of all her novels; the events in the novel may take place in a distinctly Chilean context, but the text's impact stems from its treatment of themes which have universal resonances.

The textual strategies in *El Cuarto Mundo* work constantly to undermine the notion of a fixed, coherent and stable identity, thus simulating the characters' own experience of individuation. The division of the narrative into two sections, the first related by the male twin and the second by his sister, itself engenders a kind of textual hybrid; the narrative in effect becomes a parody of the uterine space. (Eltit is later to allude directly to this concept, with the insertion of her own name into the text indicating her status as mother/ author of the project.)

There is a marked difference in the narrative styles of the twins' respective discourses. The first section is relatively coherent, grounded in the principles of logocentric discourse, whereas the female twin's account is disjointed and illogical, often scabrous in detail. The divergent modes of enunciation reflect the altered psychological condition of the family as it deteriorates to a state of disjunction (indeed, the typographical arrangement of the second section is rather more fragmented and erratic than the first).

The thematic impetus of *El Cuarto Mundo* is the struggle to establish identity and the restrictions imposed on this by various agents (for example, the nuclear family, society). I will begin by examining the role and influence of the family in this process.

## THE FAMILY

'The Family' features in the novel both in a literal sense and in a metonymical one (the generic Chilean 'family'), and in both senses it is held to be an important locus of identity. In part, what Eltit explores are the consequences arising when the family, a micro-structural social institution, fulfils its function of defining and enforcing the parameters of sexuality too well - when the "apretado cinto familiar" (p.45) becomes stifling.

The respective roles of the parents, the cornerstone of the nuclear family, are shown to be rooted in traditional, long-established conceptions of gender propriety. The character of the mother is invariably presented as supine (her "mezquindad" [p.130] is mentioned), aberrant and as possessing an intellectual capacity which is deemed woefully deficient: "mi madre tenía escasas ideas y, lo más irritante, una carencia absoluta de originalidad" (p.14). Even her dreams are fatuous: "Los sueños de mi madre portaban un error torpe y femenino" (p.31). The father, in contrast, is an incarnation of institutionalised authority; dictatorial and imperious, privately cherishing family upsets as an opportunity for him to "recordarnos la extensión de su poder" (p.89). In both parents there is a marked tendency towards essentialism; the mother appears to derive fulfilment from her maternal role; "había encontrado por fin, su razón sexuada...el rol de su propia naturaleza" (p.33), a condition with which the father is in full accord, esteeming the male nature as one which affords "un destino estable e iluminado en su dignidad" (p.43), while his wife's fate, as a woman, concedes only a "destino animalizado" (p.42). Although the characters of the parents subscribe to this kind of biological determinism, it is readily impugned by the text. This is of course revealed in the twins' interchange of gendered identities, but also in the parental couple's behaviour; the artifice of gender as a social construction is evinced in the mother's spurious interest in the feminine accoutrements of dresses, perfume and jewellery (p.18) and by the revelation that the father's autocratic abuse of the mother is actuated by the need to conform to social expectations; "para reafirmarse ante los demás" (p.44).

The twins themselves begin to display the rigidly-defined gender roles which they witness their parents perform. Having assimilated what are interpreted as being suitably 'feminine' characteristics, the twin sister mimics her mother's behaviour, borrowing perfume and trying on an array of dresses and outfits (p.73). The male twin too is subject to this process of internalisation, and his

developing attitudes provide an ironic insight into the attitudes of the adults. Considering his two sisters as beings devoid of all "vestigio de racionalidad" (p.57), he adopts his father's propensity to objectify the mother, considering her as a creature undergoing the process of "transformándose casi en un objeto más" (p.53). At one point the male twin even describes himself as his sister's husband (p.75); accordingly, she accuses him of having become her "carcelero más feroz" (p.74). It is significant that this process of internalising the rules of prevalent gender distinctions occurs solely in the first section of the novel, before the incestual act and 'feminisation' of the brother, and while the family still maintains a precarious influence. In the second section, the attempt at gender conformity which the twins make ("actuamos el inicio de conformación de una pareja adulta" [p.138]) is axiomatically doomed to failure - the parody of the gender model can remain merely that. (It is interesting also to note that in impersonating the feminine persona the female twin represented "la pieza más frágil y devastada" [p.138].)

If the family is the locus of identity, it is equally that of conflictual impulses, with which the entire narrative of *El Cuarto Mundo* is imbued. Jealousies and petty conceits inform quotidian family interaction; the characters on occasion fight physically, form alliances with other family members, and exact revenge, undoubtedly the most pernicious of which is that carried out by the mother in 'baptising' her son with his sister's name. Despite the father's remaining "ajeno a la venganza" (p.29), the mother's action is effective, and exemplifies the battle for power within the family, which is always waged according to masculine and feminine distinctions. It seems that the struggle for autonomy has colonised every possible space; even the womb does not constitute a privileged space of refuge, it too now a site of conflict (p.16, p.24). Perhaps the mother's vengeful baptism of her son comes as a response to her rape at the hands of the father which is described indifferently on the first page of the novel, that is, her action is an expression of a limited female power, in the same mode as her withholding of sexual affection and her rendering of the father as otiose in the care of the children ("para mi madre él no representaba nada" [p.33]). In this sense, her transgression is the adulteration of the patriarchal order. But might her action, which, as I have already said, typifies the male/ female battle being waged within the family, be intended as an indictment of the binary system of gender classification, the artificial configuration whose resultant dichotomy leads the father to view his wife "como cuerpo enemigo" (p.15) ? It is, after all, against such binarisms that *El Cuarto Mundo* is written, and although it is naturally the twins' relationship which

most clearly challenges gender categorisations, the importance of the parents' characters in this respect must also be recognised.

Although the process of 'encierro' is precipitated by the guilt and shame brought on the family by the mother's adultery, in truth, the notion of guilt and the need for expiation are experienced by members of the family throughout the novel. Indeed, early on in the novel the male twin makes reference to his mother's "permanente estado de culpa" (p.18) which leads her to the self-mutilatory practice of fasting (the younger sister too is later to adopt this practice). Wilful self-starvation within a context where food is scarce and the family are said to suffer frequently from hunger can be seen as a mode of self-censorship; anticipating the deleterious conditions imposed by others in a process of self-inflicted harm. Guilt and shame are the nexus of the family's existence, the common thread linking their lives. Eltit ironises García-Márquez's image of the thread of blood as an affirmatory ancestral connection, presenting the "incesante hilo de sangre" (p.112) which accompanies the mother ever since her adultery as the shameful vinculum of their existences. Ostensibly, then, the twins' recourse to incest is a result of their mother's sin, which causes the family's domestic confinement and thus provokes the process of psychological 'encierro'. Although in reality the family never existed within a prelapsarian era, shame is clearly considered a defect perpetuated and transmitted by the female.

Similarly, the parents' relegation in the second section to displaced, dislocated bodies who are extraneous to the events taking place is not wholly applicable to the adultery and resultant 'encierro'. The precedent is set, in fact, on the very first page of the novel; as the father rapes the mother, the foetal narrator states "No hubo palabras" (p.11). For the mother, this voiceless condition is to continue throughout the text; she is never once to enunciate a word or thought. The father, however, is not only given a direct voice within the novel (p.111), but the rasping asperity of his speech is also to dominate the text indirectly: "casi no cruzábamos palabras, saturados por el sonido metálico de la voz de mi padre" (p.106). The parents' difficulties in communicating successfully are ascribed both to the asphyxiating condition of marriage (they are a couple "agobiada por el nudo perpetuo" [p.87]) and to the vague external conditions, "el afuera", which beget "la desarticulación de la familia" (p.88). By the end of the novel, the mother is still in a state of silence and the father's sole function is to enounce "alarmantes juicios" (p.121).

Although it is evident that the family in *El Cuarto Mundo* necessarily reflect the compulsions of the society in which they exist, Eltit seems to employ the family too as a parodic representation of Chile itself. They incarnate the dysfunctions of a nation under a violent dictatorship; the mother is silent and passive, her resistance (in the form of adultery) having proved ineffectual as a means of liberation; the father formal and distant, his dictatorial actions branding his children with "los efectos devastadores con que la figura paterna castigaba a su rebaño" (p.89). The characters' own assertions support this interpretation - the mother and twin sister believing that the father is "coludido con esa nación y que nosotros somos la carroña" (p.129). If indeed the family symbolise Chile's "caída" (p.125), the omens for its future are not auspicious. The motif of circularity in the novel - for example, as evinced in the characters' foetal posture at the end of the novel (they are "ovillados" [p.106]) mimicking the novel's beginning with the image of a foetus - suggests that the cycle of oppression and ineffectual resistance, "la tragedia cíclica" (p.88), is one which is doomed to be interminably replayed.

## SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Given that the twins do begin the normal process of individuation, internalising the appropriate behavioral and psychological attributes of their respective genders, one of the central questions posed by *El Cuarto Mundo* is that of aetiology - what constitutes the stimulus which provokes the incestual expedient, perhaps the most widely-operative taboo of civilised societies?

The act of incest described at the beginning of the second section retains its arresting and striking quality despite the accretion of clues indicating such a culmination in part one. Although the twins ostensibly accede to the Manichaeian definitions of gender evinced by their parents, the occasions on which they assume divergent identities are invariably detrimental to at least one twin, and often, indeed, to both. Even at a young age the brother feels endangered by the scission of wholeness inherent to the concept of 'other': "El otro constituía el posible gesto homicida de una destrucción" (p.28). Later, as pubescent teenagers, the onset of menstruation leads to division - the sister's corporeal experiences are a "viaje ajeno" (p.69) to her brother, who senses that "algo definitivo se interponía entre nosotros" (p.70). But it is not simply that the brother is subjected to a disturbing process of alienation; the schism produced between brother and sister, previously apprehended in the brother's dreams as images of "muslos sangrantes" (p.54),

precipitates a total effacement of identity: "imágenes de muerte...apagando mi organismo" (p.54). (This consequence is prefigured in the novel by the male foetus' hostile reaction to particular images in his mother's dreams: "El color rojo de la lava me causó espanto" [p.13].) Death, of course, is the paradigmatic effacement, and it is a kind of death which the brother envisions at the suggestion that he and his sister should lead separate lives; he considers this prospect an "enajenación suicida" (p.94) (by killing the other the self is also effaced).

In the face of such an annihilation of the self, the twins establish a bond of reciprocal alterity, an elision of identities. Thus, as the twin sister states pithily; "Evolucionábamos a un compromiso híbrido" (p.109). The result is a trans/con/fusion of genders; the male child undergoes a nascent process of feminisation in the womb ("sufrí la terrible acometida de los terrores femeninos" [p.12]), assumes a decidedly feminine countenance in his first sexual encounter (his *passivity* is emphasised) and even finds a way to participate in the extraneous menstrual rite by bleeding from his nose and thus re-establishing his "nexo íntimo" (p.70) with his sister. The brother also realises an androgynous existence in his recourse to transvestitism ("Mi hermano mellizo adoptó el nombre de María Chipia y se travistió en virgen" [p.109]). The sister too sustains an inversion of gender, informing her brother that "tú eres yo misma" (p.130) and appropriating him as a subjective mirror: "me utilizaba para reflejarse en mis pupilas, para leerse en mis pupilas, para apreciarse en mis pupilas" (p.73). (In effect, this constitutes a transgressive, even subversive act, for the sister is actively blurring the distinction between subject and object - she becomes both.)

The theme of androgyny in the novel also extends to characters other than those of the twins. There are several references to the ambiguous gender status of María de Alava, the twins' younger sister, for example. Biologically female, she possesses "la unidad genética" (p.49) of her father, evincing a typically masculine manner in her mode of speech and mental aptitude. Even her physiological female status is dubious: "Su estructura gruesa y más bien viril se contradecía con su cualidad equilibrista" (p.82). A similar equivocacy is found in the male suitor of the twin sister, who seems to be engaged in a struggle to "liberar su ambigüedad" (p.78), together with the indeterminate figure who assaults (or is assaulted by) the twin brother, in a street encounter where the assignation of gendered identity is a ricocheting process: "ese otro o esa otra que me asaltó o asalté" (p.67).

One possible motivation for the transposition of gender which Eltit

presents in *El Cuarto Mundo* is that of a return to an idyllic primordial state <sup>(2)</sup>; "la pareja humana que nosotros ya éramos, desde siempre" (p.31). In evoking the motif of a lost paradise, allusions to the expulsion from Eden inevitably occur; the twins are at one point described as "hijo de Dios" and "hija de Dios" (p.110), references to 'the fall' abound, and, accordant with the theme of inversion, it is the *female* who speaks first and is assigned the charge of naming: "Mi hermana proseguía...nombrando objetos elementales" (p.38). There is a sense in the text of the figures of the twins as being symbolic of a mythic, lost order <sup>(3)</sup>, underscored by the frequent references to atemporality (the brother makes mention of his "elástica edad cronológica" [p.48]) and the sister's hypothesis that their fusion would expedite the return to "el impacto real del origen" (p.99).

Yet a dichotomy arises from this quest for unity - is it to be read as a negative phenomenon, a product of social fissures (incest) or as a positive one, a *solution* to social fissures (fusion, unity)? There is no doubt that the divisive external conditions circumscribe the twins' behaviour; the brother describes the world as being "partido en dos", "totalmente escindido" (p.46), identifying the body as a mimetic locus: "...la prueba más tangible de un mundo oscuramente contrariado" (p.47). (Yet even these statements are intrinsically ambiguous, as they can be taken as allusions to the specifically Chilean context or equally as references to the binary system of gender.) In effect, it is both as a product of and as a response to external conditions that the twins begin their subjective retreat: "Con el mundo partido en dos, mi única posibilidad de reconstrucción era mi hermana melliza" (p.48). However, if synthesis, as epitomised in *El Cuarto Mundo* by the incestual act, is the only means of reconciling the internal/ external dichotomy ("se disolvió la frontera entre exterior e interior" [p.152]) its consequences for society must be taken to be the resultant deformed progeny, the "niño...horriblemente herido" (p.109), a further symptom of a society already exhibiting the deformities of a "sicosis perfecta" (p.116).

## THE SUDACA THEME

The allusions in *El Cuarto Mundo* to the sudaca caste most often depict them as a febrile, homogenised corpus, intimidatory in their aimlessness and uniform anonymity. Peripheral, lumpen figures, it is their fervid corporeality which is accentuated in the first section of the novel, whether in references to the beautiful naked torsos of "los jóvenes sudacas" (p.52) gazed at by the twins, the "opulentos hombres sudacas" (p.53) who are "a punto de estallar por la presión de

la ciudad" (p.53), or the mass of afflicted bodies who induce the twin brother's fever: "Exhausto por los cuerpos sudacas" (p.54). Eltit appropriates the term 'sudaca', which denotes a person whose origin is the south of Chile or Latin America, and invests it with subtle nuances of marginality and disenfranchisement (the word 'sudaca' already possesses derogatory connotation in Spanish).

Despite various references to the sudaca figures, it is not until the second section of the novel that the reader learns that the family is itself a "familia sudaca" (p.110) (the brother's reticence regarding this fact in part one evinces the family's wish to dissociate themselves from the ineluctable "estigma sudaca" [p.123] which accompanies them). The sudaca theme is most strongly developed in the second section, where the sense of political consciousness present in the novel is intensified. References to the external context depict it as a rapacious site of death, a force from which the sudaca family, represented by the nuclear family of the novel, must liberate themselves (p.124). Persecuted by "la nación más poderosa del mundo" (p.127), (a phrase which is often repeated, accentuating the axiomatic extent of its power), a nation which seeks to reinforce the sudacas' status of extreme marginality, the baby conceived through the twins' incest becomes an expiatory currency, the sacrifice through which the sudaca stigma may be purged. The twin sister proclaims the incestual imperative as "un homenaje a la especie sudaca" (p.152), while the fate of the child is to be an "ofrenda y perdón para las culpas familiares" (p.109). There is no indication, however, that this product of incestual immolation will prove effectual in impeding the sudaca fate - she is horribly disfigured and doubly marginalised, as both a female and a sudaca.

The only other alternative strategy in combating the imperialist power is the conception of a subaltern 'revolution'; the manifestation of solidarity espoused by a sudaca youth to the twin sister: "Una vez un joven sudaca extendió la mano...Habló de la fraternidad. Habló extensamente sobre la fraternidad" (p.156). Fraternity, however, is never achieved; the city is subsumed into a state of declension and the sudaca (nuclear) family are left contemplating "el abandono de la fraternidad" (p.150) as the individual family members disperse. It is significant that the impulse towards solidarity fails in part because of the lack of an effective system of communication. Although the twin sister perceives the significance of the youth's words, her brother fails to grasp the words' meaning and in fact remains detached from all sudaca discourse. The occasions on which the brother is seen engaging in any kind of interchange with his fellow sudacas are invariably

characterised by violence and mutual incomprehension. <sup>(4)</sup>

Throughout the course of the novel, the status of the sudaca race degenerates from one of precarious liminality to one of complete displacement; "No hay lugar ya para nosotros" (p.125) the twin sister states, before the other family members are forced to abandon the home. The sudaca family's condition of acquiescence and passivity had been adumbrated earlier in the novel by the sudaca girl of whom the twin brother avails himself; the girl is easily manipulated, compliant in her 'ignorance', an "insignificante muchacha sudaca que, sin entender lo que estaba haciendo, accedió a mi pedido" (p.81). The sudaca 'revolution' never seems any more than a congeries of negligible resistant sentiment: the men in the city are permanently on the verge of erupting, but never do, while the sudaca family fall in line to accept their fate ("Estamos salvajemente preparados para la extinción" [p.127]). What Eltit's text implies, then, is an ideological revolution rather than a military one; the modification of the most basic of social apprehensions.

## CONCLUSION

The premise of *El Cuarto Mundo* could be said to be that of a decolonisation of linguistic, semantic and metaphysical terrains. The most patent allusions to the theme of colonisation are to be found in the names accorded to the twins; María de Alava and María Chipia were the names of women judged by the Inquisition, while accordant references to advancing bonfires are evinced in the second part of the novel. These references, along with the use of the word 'sudaca' as employed by the Spanish, evoke the image of a colonising power, monopolising the public space. The characters of *El Cuarto Mundo* attempt to subvert and dismantle this cultural imperialism through the retroceding movement inwards, defying hierarchic and essentialist paradigms by withdrawing from them, creating a 'fourth world' which defies normative representations of gender and negates the micro-structures of patriarchal authority: "La comedia familiar rodaba hecha trizas, y asomaba su real fragilidad" (p.87).

The fourth world engendered is not merely the representation of transgressive intentions but is indeed the imbrication of gendered identities, an alternative configuration of sexuality and gender. It is essentially corporal and visceral, the appropriation of the interior physical and psychic space, the corollary of the tenets of the maligned neoliberal market economy which are rehearsed on

the individual: "La oferta y la demanda se concentraban en mi cuerpo" (p.72). Even the text itself is seen to assimilate the values of the consumer society, becoming a cultural commodity or product. Thus the "terrible trabajo orgánico" (p.25) of the mother gestating a child is identical to that of the author creating the text - the novel's last line, "La niña sudaca irá a la venta" (p.159) indicating that even the text is carnalised in such a society. What *El Cuarto Mundo* posits is the formulation of a new system, a re-appraisal of both generic and literary conventions: "Para huir de un final definitivo me abro completamente al dolor y llego a la neutralidad. Al interior de este nuevo sistema, el niño y yo transamos un acuerdo somático" (p.148).

**NOTES: CHAPTER FOUR - *EL CUARTO MUNDO***

1. All page numbers provided in this chapter refer to *El Cuarto Mundo*, Santiago, Biblioteca Breve de Seix Barral, 1996.
2. Freud suggests that androgyny has an ancestral or atavistic connection; see *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p.382: "In the first phases of erotic life, ambivalence is evidently the rule. Many people retain this archaic trait all through their lives."
3. There is a long-established tradition of the use of the figures of Adam and Eve to denote a lost, mythical unity - see *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* by Barbara G. Walker, London, Harper & Row, 1983, p.33: "Many myths model the first human beings on the androgyne. Persians said the first pair in the garden of Heden (Eden) lived together in one body, until Ahura-Mazela separated them. Jewish imitators of the Persians also said Adam and Eve were united in a bisexual body. Some rabbinical sources said Eve was not taken out of Adam; they were parted from one another by a jealous God who resented their sexual bliss, which was too Godlike for human beings, and should be reserved for deities."
4. At thirteen the twin brother is attacked by a group of "jóvenes sudacas furibundos" (*El Cuarto Mundo*, Santiago, Biblioteca Breve de Seix Barral, 1996, p. 90), while he is later addressed by a sudaca youth whose dialect he fails to comprehend.

## CHAPTER FIVE: *VACA SAGRADA*

### INTRODUCTION

Published in 1991, *Vaca Sagrada* is a subtly unnerving text, operating in a rather different manner to Eltit's previous work. The novel's kaleidoscopic style, its obliquity and its commonly elliptical mode of expression can all be seen as narrative techniques which simulate intertextually the circuitous discursive strategies which individuals living with the imposition of the official discourse of the dictatorship were obliged to adopt. *Vaca Sagrada* is also perhaps a slightly unusual novel for Eltit given its attention to the delineation of characters - along with the unnamed protagonist, the characters of Manuel, Sergio, Ana and Francisca all feature. Contextualised for the most part in the urban framework to which Eltit seems compellingly drawn, *Vaca Sagrada* is differentiated too by the inclusion of the South, either in references to Pucatrihue made by the characters, or indeed by its appearance at the end of the novel as the site of the protagonist's moment of epiphany. Thematically, however, the novel is fairly consistent with Eltit's previous work; addressing the difficulties of effective discourse, the impact of the city on the lives of individuals, the inability to engage meaningfully with others, and a subjectivity which is always fragmented and precarious.

Before examining the themes and issues of the novel which I wish to consider, an analysis of the first page of the novel (which is also its first chapter) may prove worthwhile given the conflation of themes that this passage comprises.

The protagonist's first statement attests to what has become the self-invalidating premise of language itself: "Duermo, sueño, miento mucho" (p.11 <sup>[1]</sup>). Her inherently mendacious discourse is further undermined by her oneiric allusions and her use of alcohol ("Calentada apenas por un vaso de vino" [p.11]). Both sleep and alcoholic relief function as a mode of escapism, but they also necessarily impugn the veracity of the text itself; an issue which is fundamental to the novel as a whole.

This opening passage is tinged with instances of negation; whether in terms of a dissipation; "Se ha desvanecido la forma pajaril"; an inability; "Fui incapaz de penetrar un universo" or a loss: "he perdido el hilo razonable de los nombres" (p.11). Indeed, the protagonist experiences her own identity as a dissipation, in the reduction of her body to discrete fragments; "Soy diestra sólo

en una parte, en la parte de una parte, veo apenas el agujero genitalizado de una parte", and, significantly, in her displacement towards marginality: "Me han expulsado la poderosa forma pajaril..." (p.11). This statement also reveals the protagonist's status as a passive entity in a process whereby external and unidentified agents determine her position. There are covert references in this passage to the act of writing itself (might the protagonist's fluidity of position be a metafictional allusion to the author/ character relationship?) The "ojo escalofriante que obstaculiza el ejercicio de mi mano asalariada" (p.11) can be interpreted in general terms as the hypostatization of the surveillance in the city which impedes the characters' search for wage-earning employment, but it can also be seen as the eye of censorship which hinders the engagement of the author's "mano asalariada". Thus the line "Una paga infernal me obliga a pensar en figuras sesgadas, plagadas de mutilaciones" (p.11) may allude to the author's own situation, where the novel itself is a kind of cultural transaction with all the resultant commercial obligations.

However, rereading the passage simply as a representation of the protagonist's thoughts, the statement "Sangro...mucho" followed by the reference to wine which I have already quoted, provides an ironic concatenation of imagery, as both blood and wine suggest the Eucharistic rite. The irony derives from the allusion to communion, which is precisely what is sought but never achieved by any of the characters. At best, they achieve only a transient relief in their lives "plagadas de mutilaciones". I will begin by considering this portrayal of the characters' lives.

### **THE CHARACTERS: MUTILATED BODIES**

Perhaps the most cogent impression left by the characters of *Vaca Sagrada* is that of dislocation, detachment and disengagement. This sense is conveyed by their relationships with each other, their interior monologues and by the disjointed style of narration in which Eltit juxtaposes events with characters' thoughts and memories (with frequent recourse to the technique of analepsis) enhancing the novel's disorientating effect. At no point are any physical descriptions of the characters provided; increasing the sense of vacuity which permeates the narrative. Nor is the central protagonist ever given a name.

The central protagonist, a woman, is undoubtedly the most self-aware of the characters, which makes her exile from selfhood - "Extraviada de mí misma"

(p.16) - all the more arduous. For most of the narrative she is immersed in the fruitless process of trying to reconcile her "permanente contradicción" (p.49) with the external reality with which she is at variance. She elects to disengage herself from any collective inclination; "desconfiaba del ensamble de los cuerpos" (p.17), spurning even sexual relationships in favour of her capacity for self-gratification: "lo sexual no me interesaba demasiado...lo cierto es que nunca había experimentado una sensación que a solas ya no conociera" (p.17). Basic social interaction is also to be avoided: "nadie me interesaba en especial y consideraba que la vocación a la amistad o a la conversación sólo eran una fuente de problemas" (p.26). Her putative wish for autonomy, however, belies an intense need to be both affirmed and to find a way of effecting the psychological integrity which she lacks. It is to the nebulous character of Manuel that she assigns this role. Her need to "aferrarme a algo" (p.32), however, is frustrated by his departure to the South, creating in the protagonist a pernicious scission of identity. Thus she is plagued by visions of her own deformity, amidst the self/body dichotomy which renders her a victim of a malign somatic conspiracy: "Mi cuerpo congelado sublevándose en la noche" (p.123). Her own subjectivity is condensed to a purely physical level: "En esos meses logré ser sólo un cuerpo que cumplía diversas obligaciones" (p.24); "un presente que me condenaba a ser sólo un cuerpo aferrado al acto primitivo de la sobrevivencia" (p.135).

Francisca too seems to sustain this corporeal phenomenon. Her body is the locus of every one of her experiences; the hollow of her "piernas abiertas" (p.110) the constant reference point of her discourse. It is a site of passivity and renunciation of will; whether receiving the aggressive gaze of Sergio; "su deseo de contemplarla, de tenerla, de atacarla" (p.61), the physical violence which leaves her "sin poder articular una sola frase" (p.36) or the idle sexual onslaught ("El embrutecimiento de mi cuerpo" [p.97] ) which serves only to increase the incessant sense of solitude: "intentó...cerrar sus oídos a las palabras para permanecer atenta únicamente a sí misma" (p.145). Like the protagonist, Francisca uses her relationships with men as a means of eliciting self-affirmation; seeking from Sergio a way to "otorgar sentido a los extremos marginales de su cuerpo" (p.70). Wholeness, however, is never achieved; indeed, it is a fractured identity which the mirror reflects: "Parte de su cuerpo había huido" (p.160); "la imagen que veía era apenas una imitación" (p.161). (This effacement of identity had been adumbrated earlier in the novel by Sergio's description of "esa olvidada Francisca" [p.52]). By the end of the novel, the character of Francisca lives out an entirely ersatz existence, having herself acknowledged the impossibility of

achieving corporeal and psychological synthesis: "Comprendió que se había perdido parte de sí misma, que únicamente la recorría una irreparable fragilidad. Era otra" (p.160). Even the language she employs is characterised by absence; Eltit accordingly assigns to Francisca an elliptical, truncated discourse, reified by the use of long hyphens and parentheses.

An incident in the bar described by the protagonist epitomises the characters' lives. Both Sergio and Manuel whisper the phrase "Caliéntame el corazón" (p.29) to the protagonist, without knowing that the other has done so. The protagonist begins to reflect on this incident: "empecé a examinar la frase que nos había unido desde diversos ángulos" (p.29). In effect, this example typifies the characters' inter-relationships in the novel; they are linked by violence, by unemployment, and by their respective disintegration of identities, yet they remain locked in a vacuum of mutual incomprehension. It is as if they are each walking along separate streets which converge on a central plaza, with each individual having the plaza in sight yet no perception of the presence of the other characters.

Eltit establishes several links between the characters, all of which seem to derive from a negative premise. They are linked, for example, through their regular recourse to masturbation; Sergio and Manuel are described engaging in onanistic behaviour, as too is Francisca ("debería haberme cortado las manos" [p.115]). Masturbation is in effect the physical symptom of a society where interaction, sexual or otherwise, has become both meaningless and dangerous. Another similarity is the perversely parodic aspects which their relationships have acquired. Any kind of 'union' is in fact a mere parody; thus Francisca clings to the man who subjects her to physical violence; "para lograr la unión más perfecta que tuvieron" (p.73) and Sergio views the relationship which has united him to Francisca as a "cordón infectado" (p.73). The protagonist too experiences this parody through the character of Ana, her cousin, a kind of antagonistic doppelganger who tries to appropriate the protagonist's own identity: "Ana amaba todo lo que yo amaba y nos desagradaban las mismas cosas" (p.79); "Quería apoderarse de mi mundo" (p.79). When characters do attain any sense of bond or connection, it is invariably revealed to be a spurious alliance - thus the protagonist can only establish a connection with Manuel through "el espesor de las mentiras" (p.19) and the annihilation of memory which alcohol provides; "Lo conduje hasta la profunda solidaridad del vino" (p.19), while Ana and Sergio, long-time lovers, are united by unhappiness: "La desdicha en ellos era el verdadero vínculo que los

mantenía en una unión estremeceadora" (p.172).

Finally, certain characters are linked by way of the key motifs which Eltit employs in the novel; the flock of birds, the unidentified man who seems to follow both Francisca and the protagonist, and the motif of a gouged-out eye. Again, it is ironic that these linking motifs are all intrinsically negative; the flock of birds signifies death and the intangibility of an evil force, the man in pursuit is a figure of doom, and the gouged-out eye in itself denotes a lack, an absence, as well as the distortion of perspective which affects all the characters.

## THE CITY

The theme of the city as narrative subject is predominant throughout *Vaca Sagrada*, both as a space inhabited by the characters and as the space which comes to inhabit (and inhibit) them. The city seems to insinuate itself constantly throughout the novel, often in the form of quite casual and tacit references made by the characters. Typically, the protagonist will add a cursory remark about the city almost as an afterthought; "Más tarde, mientras caminábamos por la ciudad - debo decir que la ciudad ya estaba increíblemente tensa - , Manuel me anunció que volvería al Sur" (p.30). Other characters too seem to display this taciturnity towards the city. Francisca, for example, speaks to Sergio of her sensation that "la ciudad siempre la estaba amenazando" (p.67), without further articulating the basis of this threatening environment. Even the external narrator, who recounts various chapters of the novel, has recourse to this technique, as in the third chapter in which the woman visiting Francisca does so " a esa hora de extremo peligro" (p.36). That the streets of the city comprise a minatory host of possibilities is implied rather than enunciated. In the case of the protagonist, at least, this may be due in part to the ignorance she dissembles as regards the pernicious external reality surrounding her; she admits at one point that "me negué a observar los innumerables cambios en la ciudad" (p.48). By taking refuge in offhand, even aloof remarks, which reinforce a sense of distance, and by employing vague and euphemistic language ("el desorden que atravesaba ese tiempo" [p.31]) the protagonist is able to maintain what she considers to be a less alarming version of reality. The retreat into commodious verisimilitude, however, may be ultimately more inimical, as Eltit reveals.

The reason for this lies in the characters' relation to the city, which is shown to be multi-faceted. Its primacy in the characters' lives is made explicit

from the novel's outset; the protagonist even defines herself with reference to the city: "Yo, que era urbana..." (p.17). It is a relationship which is in constant flux, at times providing relief in its homogenising amorphousness; "decidió salir,...esperando que la calle reforzara su anonimato" (p.149), while at other times demanding of the characters a constant process of re-configuration: "Desarmada, confundida, dejé atrás toda mi historia para reiniciar el aprendizaje del mapa de la ciudad, de los cuerpos de la ciudad, de los rostros" (p.31). The dangers which the city presents are not identified as those of a military regime (there are no references to 'metralletas' or 'soldados', for instance), rather, they stem from the intensity of the relationship between city and inhabitant, resulting in the characters' tenuous and precarious sense of identity. "La ciudad entera tenía un virus helado que deambulaba por dentro de los habitantes" (p.155) the narrator explains, reifying the city's influence as "los pedazos de ciudad" (p.155) stuck to Francisca's body. The consequences of such 'intimacy' are naturally harmful, resulting in the characters' experiencing a volatile subjectivity which is easily effaced: "Sufría una especie de desintegración, sentía que la ciudad podía explotar por todas partes" (p.51); "Debía evitar ser observada en la ciudad, tenía que borrar cualquier atisbo de carnalidad" (p.89).

Eltit's conception of the city is as a kind of postmodern paradigm, a labyrinthine underworld where the signifier has been negated and even inverted: "La ciudad estaba intersectada por innumerables energías. Haces, focos, líneas, círculos, aglomeraciones demarcaban la estructura de un moderno laberinto" (p.124). It is a vacuous, arrested place where characters are reduced to nomadic pariahs, aimlessly negotiating an indifferent terrain: "No había nada para nosotros en la ciudad. Desposeídos totalmente vagábamos de un lado para otro, persiguiendo un trabajo inexistente" (p.128). It is largely the lack of work and the debilitating conditions of pay which impel the confederation of 'las trabajadoras', whose incipient 'revolution' attracts the protagonist. United by the emblematic tattoos on their thighs, the women convene to demand the conferral of certain rights, not least of which is the right that their bodies should "habiten con soltura" (p.132). The convention of workers affords the protagonist the active status and sense of kinship which are lacking in every other area of her life: "Sólo quería salir al exterior a repetir la consigna, gritando, gritando entre la multitud" (p.132), and allows her to experience an engagement with the collective effort. The sense of solidarity is fleeting, however, as internal friction mars the campaign and subverts any sense of solidarity. The women are shown to be incapable of negotiating the public domain (ironically, "Habitar, habitar, habitar" [p.133] had been their

slogan) and the protagonist is left disabused and seeking comfort once more in alcohol; "resguardada entre las paredes de un bar" (p.172). The city, the public space, remains inaccessible - it is significant that the proposed "bullicio callejero" (p.169) never takes place. Ultimately, the city confers on the protagonist the marginal status which she sought to elude; she is left with the sole task of "sobrevivir estrechamente, sumergida entre los centros de la ciudad" (p.171).

## THE SANGUINEOUS NARRATIVE

Francisca's apparently rhetorical question; "Pero, ¿qué venda es ésta que no detiene la sangre?" (p.163) could be read as applicable to the narrative of *Vaca Sagrada* itself. It is a text saturated with the theme of blood and its imagery; whether as a totemic symbol of ritual, as a taboo, as a means of expiation and self-affirmation, or simply as a pertinent reminder of a society smeared by the bloodshed of a violent political regime.

Although blood manifests itself as a consequence of physical assault (p.36), terminal illness (p.161), a difficult labour (p.44) and as an emblem of fraternity and solidarity (p.115), it is the theme of menstrual blood which the novel most commonly addresses. The ancient taboo proscribing sexual relations during menstruation is flouted; "nada conseguía deternos. Ni mi sangre" (p.24), granting men a vicarious sense of affirmation in contagion: "Manuel me pedía que le contagiara mi sangre...para extraerla y gozar de su espesor líquido" (p.25). For women, the loss of menstrual blood is a semantically loaded occurrence which contains a profusion of subjective connotations: "La herida, mi herida, el tajo, la muerte y la víscera" (p.25). For Francisca it is an oxymoronic "hermosa herida" (p.103) which precludes sexual relations and connotes latent violence (she is subjected to frequent physical attacks in which she often bleeds). For the protagonist, however, it is an empowering experience; a self-referential retreat which alleviates the images of suffering which torment her: "La sangre que expulsaba era la única respuesta" (p.50); "Manuel estaba detenido en el Sur y mi sangre conseguía suspender su muerte por una noche" (p.51). That the ritual of menstruation has become of critical importance to the protagonist is highlighted when she succumbs to the disequilibrium which has threatened her throughout the novel - the monthly rite becomes a mere "deber físico" (p.178), homogenising her own subjectivity: "me había uniformizado con los otros cuerpos que estaban obligados a acusar los signos de una herida" (p.178).

A comment made by the protagonist which reveals the former semantic relevance of menstrual blood can be taken as significant for the interpretation of the theme of blood as a whole ("La sangre se había transformado en un líquido neutro" [p.178]). The characters inhabit a linguistically fractured society, in the sense that the spoken (and written) word has become corrupted and vitiated - it is thus inherently meaningless; an antithetical enunciation. The protagonist herself testifies to this corruption: "Fundidos en la sangre, las palabras se volvían genocidas" (p.25). This death of the word is implicitly linked to the theme of blood; "en ese tiempo, la sangre había perdido en mí cualquier rango que no fuera su irreversible conexión con la muerte" (p.51). Within such a context, blood itself becomes a mutual means of communication; a silent mode of signification ("Jamás hablábamos de la sangre" [p.25]). This 'sanguineous discourse' is potentially highly subversive, as it has the ability to obfuscate the hitherto rigid definitions of gender and subjectivity which inhibit unity. It is for this reason that the protagonist aptly refers to the blood as "amenazadores flujos" (p.25), precisely because it can be used as a medium which generates "la confusión en nuestros cuerpos" (p.25).

The reiteration of the theme of blood in *Vaca Sagrada* underscores the thematic importance of the body in Eltit's work as a whole. She has stated that one of her aims in writing the novel was to celebrate "lo sagrado del cuerpo de la mujer" <sup>(2)</sup>. It is a central paradox of the novel that the 'vaca sagrada', that which is inviolable, is in fact desacralised, both through the transgression of the taboo prohibiting sex during menstruation and through Eltit's ironising of the concept which holds the body as a sacred zone. Eltit's metaphorisation of the body in this way explains the characters' relentlessly visceral preoccupations (most often manifested in the obsession with blood) - in a society where the body has become the attenuated speculum of a much wider schism: "comprendí la escasa importancia de mi cuerpo, una materia en crisis sobre la cual se entretejían los hilos de una historia que atenuaba la llegada de una inexorable agonía" (p.178).

## UNENUNCIATION

I use the term 'unenunciation' to refer to the collective and varied instances in *Vaca Sagrada* of the usurpation of the word as a signifying agent. This usurpation not only necessitates alternative strategies of communication, but indeed redefines the nature of the ontological relationship of the individual with 'the external'; in terms of the other members of society, the hegemonic political system, the physical spaces of the city, and so on. It is the resultant displacement

of discourse, or 'unenunciation' which infuses and resonates throughout the whole narrative: "En verdad era la atmósfera la única poseedora de las señas, y hasta hoy sostengo que la voz humana se vuelve inconsistente cuando la realidad se mueve hacia los alrededores" (p.41).

The mutilation of the speaking subject is perhaps most clearly evinced in the characters' attempts at communication with each other. They seem to conduct wholly cosmetic conversations, that is, words are physically enounced, yet seem to be merely refracted, reverberating echoes, failing ever to reach another individual who could interpret the words' significance: "Asustada, se lo confié a Sergio, le hablé de la hostilidad en la ciudad, y me miró como si no entendiera mis palabras" (p.124). Thus, as the protagonist recognises, words themselves are rendered redundant: "No habría forma de detallar lo que fueron esos días, porque esos días no pueden ser contenidos por las palabras" (p.41). Although there is a lack of mutual comprehension (a direct result of the erosion of language's function as a descriptive vehicle) the need for some form of meaningful interchange does not diminish, and it is this dichotomy which informs the characters' condition. Francisca's impulse to go out onto the street is prompted by the desire to engage with another, and thus achieve a transient sense of authenticity: "Guiada por la necesidad de hablar con alguien..." (p.149). Yet it is the behaviour of Francisca herself which impedes any engagement; on finding a telephone she is able only to articulate a codified discourse, before prematurely ending the 'conversation'.

In a society where language has ruptured to become a conduit solely for ambiguities ("toda descripción está mediatizada por la ambigüedad [p.173]), individuals must adopt alternative means of communication. One such alternative is the effective transmutation of language; revealed in *Vaca Sagrada* as a multiplicitous and inherently mendacious discourse. The characters are each immersed in the self-invalidating premise of the lie - in the protagonist's case, to the extent that she is obliged ultimately to confront "mi propia contradicción" (p.15). In Francisca's case, the habit of lying (perhaps begun in response to her mother's slow death; "si no inventaba, no iba a pasar esa noche" [p.141]) takes on greater and greater proportions, until her entire discourse becomes self-negating: "Ya me siento mejor, me siento en verdad, mal, cada vez peor" (p.110). The practice of lying in *Vaca Sagrada* is the result of the convergent discourses of a schizophrenic society. It is also a response to the official discourse, as it posits the abnegation of one sole, static truth: "mi lengua móvil no paraba de narrar múltiples historias" (p.49). Yet if the characters' practice of lying is taken as a

metonym of plurality, the omens for a society which embraces difference and diversity are wholly negative. The protagonist may relate "múltiples historias" in defiance of the official, hegemonic axiom, but it is precisely this multiplicity which condemns her; not only to a permanently disorientated state in which she often has to confront her "propia contradicción", but to the abasement to which she is subjected by Sergio, who later uses her own lies against her.

Another strategy employed is that of silence. At times the protagonist resorts to this tactic; her wilful silence a manipulation of the rhetoric of power: "No quiero referirme a eso" (p.41). (This technique finds equivalence in the deliberate act of 'forgetting' employed by the protagonist, who will only invoke that part of reality deemed harmless: "He olvidado la parte más concreta de los acontecimientos, y apenas conservo imágenes, pedazos de imágenes" [p.42]). However, silence, the epitome of 'unenunciation', is clearly of limited value as a strategy of communication. Moreover, it is assigned inherently negative connotations throughout the novel (for example, the protagonist's recollection of a violent abortion is associated with her being silenced: "Que me calle, dice, insiste" [p.47]).

In fact, the issue of the annihilation of the word is never resolved by any of the characters. The absence of any meaningful language is reified throughout the text by Eltit's attention to different kinds of lacunae; she places particular emphasis on the corporeal ellipsis of the characters. This experience is common to them all - Manuel is physically absent for most of the novel, Francisca realises that "Parte de su cuerpo había huido" (p.160) and seeks a mirror to confirm her physical disintegration, Sergio's "cuerpo ausente" (p.124) carries him around the city, and the protagonist engages in a masochistic relationship with her body, fasting in an attempt to efface it completely: "deseaba aumentar aun más la falta" (p.126).

Eltit's novel reveals there to be a reciprocity between language and the body, alluded to in an observation of the protagonist's: "No habría entendimiento. Habría sólo una abortada danza, el maquillaje, la parodia verbal" (p.170). The correlation between language and the body centres on the defining 'function' of each: language transmits *meaning*, while the body has a large part in providing and defining *identity*. The theme of masquerade in the novel ("Yo me había maquillado de un modo burlesco" [p.167]; "las caras perversamente maquilladas" [p.130]) can be equally applied to language and the body. If the body is

metaphorically 'absent', as we have seen, the donning of a mask is an attempt to restore identity, just as the recourse to alternative modes of communication in the face of the atrophy of language is an attempt to restore meaning. Ultimately, both attempts constitute a "simulación" (p.130), and both are shown to fail: "Habría sólo una abortada danza, el maquillaje, la parodia verbal" (p.170).

## CONCLUSION

The journey which the protagonist undertakes to the South, the geographical antithesis of the city, is employed in *Vaca Sagrada* as a metaphor for the 'viaje' of the writing process. As a metaphor it is highly appropriate; both comprise an inherent dichotomy. Pucatrihue is extolled by Manuel as the place where one day "alcanzaríamos la luz" (p.18), yet the same character admits that it is simultaneously an arrested place, an "infierno" (p.19). The 'viaje' constituted by the act of writing is similarly ambiguous; the protagonist at the end of the novel immerses herself in the writing process, attempting to "imponer una lógica" (p.187), yet the same process sets her on a "camino riesgoso" (p.187). (A further correspondence between writing and the South is of course that both represent places of extreme marginality.) In fact, both the attempt to impose logic and the resultant risk incurred have in themselves dualistic resonances - the protagonist seeks to impose order on the organic task of writing as well as on the external reality around her, with the associated risk both to her psychological integrity and even her physical well-being (given the repressive context of censorship). This plurality of valences seems to epitomise the central theme of *Vaca Sagrada*; the impossibility of authenticity. It is against this axiom that the protagonist searches for 'evidence'; tapes, letters and photographs, in the attempt to present and compile an essential 'truth'. It is significant that her efforts, the attempt to invoke "un espacio neutro...sin ninguna jerarquía" (p.188) - that is, a neutral, legitimate truth - are negated by her own words in the novel's concluding paragraph: "Pero no era así" (p.188). Ultimately, it is only ever an uneasy verisimilitude which can be attained; "la paradoja del graznido" (p.183), a single sound transmuted into a multitude of discrete semantic resonances.

**NOTES: CHAPTER FIVE - VACA SAGRADA**

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *Vaca Sagrada*, Buenos Aires, Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1991.
2. See *Conversaciones con Diamela Eltit*, (Leonidas Morales, T. [ed], Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio) p.76

## CHAPTER SIX: *LOS VIGILANTES*

### INTRODUCTION

While the narrative of *Los Vigilantes*, which is written in the epistolary style, is on the whole trenchant and cohesive, it is nonetheless frequently characterised by the visceral semantics and disjunctive syntax which often make its author's style "un lenguaje difícil" (p.13 <sup>[1]</sup>) for the reader. However, in depicting the protagonist's ineluctable psychic and somatic decline (which is paralleled and indeed precipitated by the external degeneration of the city) Eltit adopts a lexical approach which is far removed from her approach in her first novel *Lumpérica*. The disparity of styles can of course be viewed as a natural consequence of the author's developing narrative trajectory, but could also perhaps be attributed to the political circumstances under which each novel was published.

The themes addressed in *Los Vigilantes* reflect many of Eltit's central preoccupations as a writer, as evinced in much of her other work, for example, the themes of disintegration and fragmentation, the role of the city and the extent of its power, the psychological relationships between characters and the way in which these are circumscribed by 'the external', marginality, and indeed the function and limits of writing itself. The central protagonist of the novel is a woman of whom the reader is told very little; her name is Margarita (yet her name is only mentioned once and seems a rather arbitrary appellation) and she is writing to the absent father of her son (yet this absent male is never named or given a direct voice in the text). The novel documents the woman's responses to the relentlessly harsh and ultimately cataclysmic situation in which she tries to survive; from an attenuated and labile state to one of complete catatonia. Framing her narrative at the beginning and end of the novel is the audacious discourse of the child-larva, whose speech is punctuated with rudimentary renditions of sounds; "TUM TUM TUM TUM"; "BAAAM, BAAAM" (p.17) yet who acts as a potent and disquieting influence over the rest of the novel, as he himself asserts: "Ahora yo estoy cerca de controlar esta historia, de dominarla" (p.122). It is the nature and significance of the relationship between mother and son which is the first of the themes I wish to consider.

## THE MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP

The bond portrayed between mother and son is one of physical closeness at its most innocuous level, and one of pernicious symbiosis at its most intense. Both mother and son within their own respective discourses repeatedly emphasise their sense of union, which encompasses both a cerebral alliance; "Yo quiero dirigir la mano desencajada de mamá y llevarla hasta el centro de mis pensamientos" (p.122); "nació, entonces, antes en mi mente que en mi cuerpo" (p.57) and a physical homogeneity: "Yo soy idéntico a la uña, el dedo, la mano avasallada de mamá" (p.121). The two characters' synonymity of identity which is sustained throughout the novel ultimately engenders its own inevitable end, as one's identity is assimilated into that of the other, thereby creating an irremediable state of regression and inversion: "Extraigo las últimas, las últimas, las últimas gotas de leche del pecho de mamá y pongo mi boca en su boca...Mamá siente su leche en la boca y quiere escupirla" (p.127).

The resonances of the Oedipal paradigm are of course never far away. The ostensible simplicity of the child's petulant wish; "Yo quiero ser la única letra de mamá" (p.17) is belied by his purposely ambiguous references to the nature of he and his mother's relationship. "Nos amamos algunas veces con una impresionante armonía" (p.15) he states suggestively, where only pages earlier he has alluded to unambivalent sexual impulses: "Mi corazón me habla todo el tiempo de su precoz resentimiento sexual" (p.13). The child's own desire for his father's absence to be permanent is projected onto his mother; "Mamá lo que desea es que él que le escribe se congele y si lo consigue estaremos unidos para siempre" (p.19) and the strength of his desires intensifies throughout the novel, as he progresses from the child who employs deliberate tactics to deflect his mother's attention from her letters to his absent father, to the son who has assumed responsibility for his mother's existence and boldly articulates at the end of the novel "mi deseo de fundir mi carne con la suya" (p.129). This desire is frustrated throughout the novel largely by his mother's engagement with writing. The resultant physical neglect is much maligned by the son; his mother is "De tan mezquina que no me convida ni un poquito de calor" (p.16), and his resolve to impede his mother's writing ("Cuando yo hable impediré que mamá escriba" [p.17]) is epitomised as the inchoate impulses of the child in establishing autonomy from the parent. Indeed, the psychological terrain of the characters of mother and son is exhibited as a mimetic representation of the external struggle for hegemony which surrounds and conditions their behavioural impulses. Thus mother and son are shown

engaged in the battle to confirm their own ascendancy: "Mamá desea que se me caigan los pocos dientes que tengo para que no se me vaya a quedar una palabra metida entre los huesos" (p.18). It is significant too that the most effective mode of evincing and confirming authority is by oppressing another: "Mamá se siente menos abrumada cuando me ve helado" (p.19). Similarly, the bizarre games in which the son finds diversion and which the mother cannot neatly categorise can be seen as the fragmented, incoherent reification of 'the external', that is, the city in crisis - the child creates with his games "un espacio sitiado que no le permite ya ninguna salida" (p.35). On the child's own body are enacted the extrinsic dialectics, dichotomies and conflicts which lead the child to the verge of disintegration. His speech too, like his games, contains inherent contradictions; "No quiero entenderlo. Entiendo todo" (p.14), while his manic laughter is explicitly connected to the hostility of the 'climate': "sus carcajadas que parecen multiplicarse en medio de este frío" (p.33). The metonymy of the child's games eventually results in a destructive process of internalisation; his mother comments that her son "se empieza a fundir con sus objetos" (p.104), as his 'game' with the containers "se acaba a cerrar sobre sí mismo" (p.113). By the end of the novel, a disquieting transposition of identities has occurred, as the mother too participates in ordering the containers throughout the house; having in effect regressed to an infantile state. The "boca que no habla" (p.14) which was previously the son's is now conferred on the mother, whose oppressed state is conveyed by the depiction of her as a voiceless (silenced) infant.

The mother-son relationship in *Los Vigilantes* is also couched in metaphoricity. It is possible to consider the characters not only as an embodiment of the kind of fractured family unit engendered by the policies of the dictatorship, but on a wider scale, as a representation of the Holy Family itself. The apotheosis of the son ("tu hijo tiene a su favor recursos divinos" [p.36]) lends credence to this interpretation, as too do the mother's repeated references to "tu hijo" rather than 'my' or 'our' son, and the association of the mother with the colour blue (a colour traditionally associated with Mary). The absent father, neglectful towards his child; "Ni siquiera abasteces las necesidades de tu hijo" (p.35), and attributed as possessing a marked salvific ability; "Te suplico que intercedas y me salves" (p.48), can be taken as a metonym for God the father or alternatively as representing the figure of the dictator; "resguardado tras una cobarde oscuridad" (p.101). The fact that both interpretations are possible is perhaps an ironic reflection on the deification of the dictator promoted within Chilean society.

## ENCIERRO

The house in which mother and son exist, "encerrados entre cuatro paredes" (p.31) is one of very few deictic signs afforded to the reader of *Los Vigilantes*; the others being the change of the seasons and the immutable presence of the city. From the first page of the novel, the restrictive sense of claustrophobia is underscored; "La incomprendible pequeñez de la casa se superpone en mi mente" (p.13), as mother and son remain, in the mother's words, "reducidos en la casa" (p.31). This reduction of the characters to diminutive metonymic figures is the corollary of the external social praxis which seeks to ascribe to individuals their own "espacio cerrado" (p.63), the boundaries of which must not be transgressed. The house as microcosm is a notion which Eltit employs and examines throughout the course of the novel (this notion does of course have significant implications for the reading of the text's 'feminist' concerns, an issue which I will later consider). The characters' (inter)actions within the house, which interestingly is never portrayed as a *home*, reflect and enact the prescribed societal order - it is for this reason that the child's grandmother (presumably the protagonist's mother-in-law) scrutinises the house, as if seeking out "la realización de una escena increíble detrás de los umbrales" (p.61). Occasionally, the house is also seen to be a place of umbrage, both in a generalised sense; "yo no tengo otro refugio como no sea mi casa" (p.59) and as a tangible means of obviating the presence of 'extraneous' individuals, as in the case of the grandmother: "Te anuncio que desde este instante le cerraré todas las puertas de la casa. Como ves, tu agresión puede ser fácilmente diluida" (p.44). In this sense, the house has a 'dual' function, as its perimeters work not only to ensure the confinement of the inhabitants but also to debar the intrusion of the external. The effect of this exclusion is demonstrated by the son's reaction to his grandmother's visits - these cause him extreme consternation, since, as the mother explains, he detests "la intrusión de desconocidos" (p.43). The neighbours' houses too ascribe to this order, which is effectively a disengagement with the collective and the social, exemplified by their 'arrangement' to keep their doors closed to the homeless. It is no doubt with this dual function of a boundary or fence in mind (that is, to keep in as much as to keep out) that the neighbours seek to impose their new civic laws, "que terminarán por formar otro apretado cerco" (p.64). Eltit also introduces the idea of territoriality in the neighbours' behaviour; there are various comparisons of the characters with animals, and the neighbours themselves are at one point described as "cazadores de presa", terrified of everything which "amenace sus espacios" (p.78).

'Encierro' within this context is thus inevitable and expedient for the individual's personal survival. The vigilance experienced by the protagonists is exerted by several different agents; the absent father, the grandmother, and the neighbours, both as individuals and as a group. The situation becomes progressively worse until it reaches the stage at which every socially constructed relationship is fractured: "Los padres acechan a sus hijos, los hijos a sus madres, el extraño a la extraña, la conocida a una desconocida" (p.74). The mother's behaviour is impugned both on a personal level, as the absent father challenges the moral integrity of her "comportamiento genital" (p.73) and on a level of 'social' virtue, as the neighbours name her as "la cabecilla de una incierta irregularidad urbana" (p.77). The mother's urban transgression too has a certain air of inevitability about it, as her status within the society is at best liminal and at worst openly insubordinate. Her crime, to have given shelter to some homeless families on the brink of death, will necessarily be viewed as indefensible, as she herself realises: "Ante los ojos de las autoridades no tendré la menor posibilidad de resultar exculpada" (p.95). The use of the word 'ojos' here is significant, as it confirms the mother's position as object rather than subject. Similarly, the power of naming, and hence defining, is conferred only on the neighbours, who name the mother as "la cabecilla". In contrast, the power of language is gradually wrested from the mother, until she becomes a babbling, inarticulate creature who can only dream "algunas palabras marginales" (p.113). Language generally is subjected to a disjunctive process; one which Eltit subtly explores. Words themselves either become redundant; "ya no distingo a los jueces de los vecinos, a los vecinos de las autoridades" (p.109) or else assume new and distorted meanings, perhaps the most sinister example of which is the use of the term 'vecina', which somewhat paradoxically comes to mean 'a person who spies on others'; thus the grandmother becomes the protagonist's "vecina más cercana" (p.105). Ultimately, every interstice of language becomes 'vigilado': "Y más adentro aún nos vigilan las otras palabras" (p.123). The process of 'encierro', then, is seen both to be engendered by the prevalent external conditions and to mirror them - it is to this dichotomy that the mother refers when she advocates that her son discover "el impresionante dilema que contienen las habitaciones" (p.40). The effects of 'encierro', however, are invariable, the most obvious and destructive of which is that of internalisation; "La criatura continúa ensimismada" (p.117) the mother writes ruefully. I will now examine the role and influence of the city in this process.

## THE CITY

The city could be described as a character itself within the novel; frequently personified and reified in the protagonist's increasingly anguished letters. Its amorphous, intangible presence serves to magnify its baleful quality - it is "una ciudad...asediada" (p.41) by vague, impalpable forces which turn its inhabitants into nebulous figures: "los inciertos sobrevivientes de no sé cuál misteriosa guerra" (p.84). At first, mother and son can only delineate the city's presence and their feelings towards it by oblique references to 'the outside' (in this they share a remarkable consistency). Thus the child fears the occasions when his mother obliges him to "salir hacia afuera" (p.17) and the mother employs notably evasive phrases when referring to external conditions: "Afuera está plagándose de una extrema turbulencia" (p.27). Gradually, however, the mother's tone becomes more strident, as she details the city's deterioration from a state of progressive derangement to one of stasis and abeyance: "la violencia del frío que mantiene a la ciudad casi paralizada" (p.33). Devoid of morality and any possibility of an edifying source (the popular view is that "la ciudad ha sido abandonada por la mano de Dios" [p.41], although the mother considers its decline more a result of men's own cupidity) the social fissures deepen, producing a seemingly ineluctable and even fated demise: "La ciudad se derrumba, se derrumba en la soledad de su destino" (p.64). The role of the mother's letters has now changed, becoming a testimonial discourse; "soy la testigo de la desatención" (p.81), a role which the son deliberately attempts to shun: "Permanece encerrado en las habitaciones como si quisiera eludir ser el testigo de una creciente anarquía" (p.72). Eltit often underscores the sense of corporeal connection she perceives between protagonist and city. The testimonial role occupied by the mother provides an example of this; she is personally imperiled by witnessing the city's deterioration, as her own somatic integrity is threatened by the sense of fragmentation and resultant "desajuste" (p.81) caused to her organism. Cognisant of the threat posed to her identity and that of her son, the mother effects a kind of conformity as a means of survival. This too, however, is not without risk to personal integrity: "Hacerme urbana ha constituido en mí un aprendizaje dolorosa" (p.66).

Conformity is defined within exiguous boundaries in a city where a curfew is imposed and "el reglamento que rige a la ciudad" (p.105) is defied only at severe personal cost. The artifice of the new social construction is not lost on the protagonist, to whom the city now seems "un espacio irreal, un lugar abierto hacia lo operático y hacia lo teatral" (p.40); that is, the city has become a stage where a

perverse and disquieting "obra teatral" is being enacted. In this sense, the script must not be deviated from and the performance is staged with one end in mind: to secure the favourable attentions of "el otro Occidente" (p.41). Non-conformity seems to proceed for the most part from the ranks of the subaltern classes, represented by 'los desamparados'. Even the vocabulary used to describe these people has its emphasis on marginality, as Eltit frequently repeats the term "orillas" in this context: "los habitantes de las orillas" (p.66); "los rumores...que ponen, a los que ocupan las orillas, en el lugar de la catástrofe" (p.87). Again, the notion of predestination is evoked, as the 'desamparados' are shown to be fully aware of their prescribed role within the society - it is a role of immolation: "La ciudad necesita de nuestras figuras agobiadas para ejecutar el sacrificio" (p.107). The systematic elimination of these figures is requisite for the attainment of the new Occidental dream, where even aesthetic values are conscripted; "mis propios vecinos...han conseguido convertir la vigilancia en un objeto artístico" (p.37) in pursuit of "una ciudad inmaculada que es inexistente" (p.64). Maculate and discordant, the city impinges on its inhabitants' lives in an intractable and potent manner. It is effectively its inhabitants' superego. Its impact, the scabrous "procedimiento ciudadano" (p.32) of the neighbours, is deleterious and divisive, creating a paranoid and dysfunctional society where each person is safest "recluida en su pieza" (p.48) and where a disengagement with society seems the only judicious option: "La casa es ahora nuestra única orilla" (p.116). Above all, the city effects a climate of stasis; "La vigilancia ya nos ha paralizado" (p.112) and silence: "consumidos en una guerra silenciosa, una batalla muda" (p.112). It is against these effects that the mother writes.

## WRITING AND THE WORD

The epistolary technique which Eltit employs in *Los Vigilantes* is effective in impugning the role and function of writing generally. It is clear from the outset that writing is to occupy a central place in the novel, as its first sentence reveals: "Mamá escribe. Mamá es la única que escribe" (p.13). Indeed, the mother's meticulous attention to her writing is often a source of contention between she and her son, to such an extent that the son at times questions whether he himself may be simply his mother's narrative construct: "Existo sólo en un conjunto de papeles" (p.16); "las páginas que nos separan y nos inventan" (p.18).

The tone and content of her letters vary from mordant assertions of hardship and malaise to laconic acerbity in response to what is viewed as the

father's impudence and unreasonable demands. By electing not to reveal the father's side of the correspondence, Eltit creates a dualistic effect - the dark forces which militate against the protagonist appear all the more cogent, while doubts are raised in the reader's mind as to the veracity of the mother's at times seemingly irrational and even inane claims. However, as the novel progresses the letters come to seem less and less tendentious and increasingly incisive and urgent, as Eltit skilfully manipulates the inflections of the protagonist's discourse.

Several motives for writing are suggested throughout the novel; ranging from the son's interpretation that his mother writes so that "nos volvamos felices en las letras que escribe" (p.17) to his mother's pithy analysis of her motives: "sólo escribí para no llenarme de vergüenza" (p.115). On another occasion, she adumbrates her motives on a note of resignation, stating baldly to the father; "Simplemente escribí para ver cómo fracasaban mis palabras" (p.110) - that is, writing has become a perverse parody of itself, sublating its usual heuristic premise to become unresisting and self-fulfilling. Yet on the following page the mother re-defines her motives, now identifying the need to secure a kind of permanence as a motivating factor: "Sólo lo escrito puede permanecer pues las voces y sus sonidos, de manera ineludible, desembocan en el silencio y pueden ser fácilmente acalladas, malinterpretadas, omitidas, olvidadas" (p.111). This raises an interesting point with respect to Eltit's treatment of the use of silence as a political strategy. In this novel, the protagonist's silence is synonymous with her conformity; both of which she actively renounces. Although Eltit acknowledges that silence may well afford a degree of defence (the mother writes that shame might one day cause her to "escudarme en el silencio" [p.111]) its efficacy as a subversive political strategy is rejected, as the mother persists in her writing despite the danger which this invites. Indeed, it is precisely the silenced in society - the marginalised who have "perdido incluso la facultad de la palabra" (p.75) - who are denied any status or power. However, the rejection of silence in no way implies that the attempt at articulation is unexacting. Indeed, the process is fraught with obstacles; the mother often records her frustrated efforts at enunciation: "¿cómo podría explicarte, entre las limitaciones que presentan las palabras,..." (p.82); "no sé con qué palabras describirte este cielo" (p.62). Neither is there any suggestion that the protagonist's difficulties of expression derive from her position as a woman; since the male child and male 'desamparados' also experience difficulties in appropriating effectively the tool of language. Effective discourses are occluded by the oppressive climate (hypostatized by the cold which "entorpece la letra" [p.42] of the mother) which

seeks to censor and silence all that fails to comply with the 'official' discourse, insidiously inscribed even within the private realm of the family and the home. Censorship is thus imposed by a family's own members: "Tu madre...Censura mis palabras y me prohíbe expresar cualquier sentimiento que no esté de acuerdo con lo que ella llama: 'el esplendor del nuevo tiempo'" (p.105). The protagonist's letters attest to the consequences experienced when self-censorship is not exercised, when the external will, which, as the son states, wanted to "Destruir y acallar a mamá" (p.121), is deliberately defied. The great irony is that it is the mother's own words, her letters, which are used as evidence against her; "lo escrito es la razón de mi condena" (p.115). Perhaps the greater irony, however, is that her words are ultimately rendered redundant: "Tenemos hambre y tenemos frío y la letra se evapora y se vuelve todavía mas inútil" (p.127).

### PSYCHOSOMATIC DISINTEGRATION

One of the most frequently recurring motifs of *Los Vigilantes* is that of the cold, alternately referred to as "el clima" which assails the protagonists. The climate, which can be seen as a metaphor for the political climate of the time, informs every aspect of the characters' lives, turning them into wan figures denuded of any resources or recourses with which to defend themselves. The inclemency of the climate is an incessant assault; for although it is the cold which reduces them to "simples materias orgánicas" (p.61), the onset of summer is also malevolent, bringing a "sol implacable" and an "intolerable calor" (p.70) which beleaguer the mother. A kind of organic travesty is effected; the body becomes a subversive locus, a discrete configuration of antagonistic fragments. Thus the mother describes how she now experiences food "como un desafío" (p.71), and how her body "se balancea al borde de un cataclismo" (p.60). The ultimate effect is one of ontological estrangement: "toda la noche mi corazón me ha hostilizado sin cesar" (p.29). Eltit depicts an unrelenting situation from which her characters never have any real hope of escape, although the mother does attempt to employ various tactics as coping mechanisms, all of which result in futility. At times in her discourse there are traces of wry pawkiness in which a certain air of defiance can be sensed (for instance, when she queries the father's fixation with the pursuit of the Occidental dream; "Dime ¿ acaso no has pensado que Occidente podría estar en la dirección opuesta?" [p.65]), however, such questions are inevitably considered impertinent and only add to her downfall. She later elects to assume alterity as a means of placating her antagonists; "haré de mí la figura occidental que siempre has deseado. Seré otra, otra, otra. Seré otra" (p.85), yet this assertion

of desubjectivisation rings hollow and it is one with which she is clearly unable to comply. Finally, she attempts to transcend the situation by appropriating her own reality; "En realidad tú no eres, sólo ocupas un lugar abstracto" (p.110) she tells the father, continuing that "sólo tu hijo y yo somos reales" (p.112). In effect, writing itself is an attempt to transcend reality, yet its consequences are in fact antithetical to the mother's purpose, as her writing obfuscates her identity in much the same way as the son's games: "Inclinada, mamá se empieza a fundir con la página" (p.16); "Tu hijo...se empieza a fundir con sus objetos" (p.104).

## ISSUES OF GENDER

A considerable measure of identity is of course construed by gender; that is, in the sense of socially assigned gender roles. As I mentioned earlier with regards to 'encierro', by employing the idea of the house as a mimetic representation of society at large, Eltit's narrative throws into crisis not only the dysfunctional domestic affairs of the house but the (in this case) patriarchal social imperatives which have engendered them. This thread runs persistently and subtly throughout the novel. Indeed, the absent male continues to exert a potent influence over the domestic situation, as the mother is unable to surmount the hierarchical system in which she has been conditioned to perform as the father's "fiera doméstica" (p.45) within a society which wields "la poderosa historia de la dominación" (p.46). Paradoxically, the absence of the father may in fact invest him with more power - he continues, as the mother says, "tiranizándome en esta ciudad" (p.45), leading to an effective system of self-censorship, or auto-surveillance, which the mother can only reluctantly exercise. Thus she must be vigilant of her own words and actions; apologising for her vehement outbursts in order to conform to the exigencies of the rigid social configuration. It is not only in this sense that women are complicit in the system of oppression, as the behaviour of the grandmother and the *vecina* reveals. Eltit dissects the mechanisms of oppression fully; depicting a society where women keep other women under surveillance for men, and may even derive a sense of their own identity from the process, as is the case with the grandmother who is fearful of losing "el lugar de la emisaria" (p.52) which affords her the semblance of power. Whether her actions can be explained in terms of the lack of status available to women in society, or as a corollary of the still-unresolved Oedipal tensions (the protagonist shrewdly refers to the grandmother and her son as a "pareja" [p.86]), the ironic fact that emerges is that it is largely women's collusion as agents of their own subjugation which perpetuates and validates the system of oppression.

## CONCLUSION: THE OCCIDENTAL TRAGEDY

The inevitability of the protagonist's fall is persistently impressed upon the reader of *Los Vigilantes*. Her state of lability is precipitated by the spurious sense of identity that she derives from writing ("las páginas...que nos inventan" [p.18]), her position of dual marginality (both as a woman and as a writer) and by her refusal or inability to conform to the role assigned to her in a society which is vested with the artifice of "una obra teatral" (p.41). The city, which has become "una ciudad transformada sólo en un volumen estilizado" (p.93), demands that its inhabitants fulfill the roles of their characters, to such an extent that individual identity can be authenticated solely within this stylized context: "la esquina de esta única calle que nos hace existir" (p.115). The overall effect is one of pervasive artificiality: "es la arrogancia occidental trenzada con el miedo lo que mantiene esta especie de fachada" (p.64). In this way, the very foundations of social identity, that of the illustrious 'Occidente', are undermined, as this statement of the protagonist's reveals: "La verdad es que he perdido la certeza de saber ya qué se nombra, cuando se nombra el Occidente" (p.88). The characters - that is, both the literary constructs of the novel and the city's inhabitants - enact their own Occidental tragedy. Tragic because the protagonist foresees her own downfall and is powerless to prevent it, and tragic also because of its 'universal' quality - Eltit has created in *Los Vigilantes* a mythology of hegemony and exclusion which is pertinent to the whole of Latin America.

**NOTES: CHAPTER SIX – *LOS VIGILANTES***

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *Los Vigilantes*, Santiago, Editorial Sudamericana, 1994.

### **III**

**LUCÍA GUERRA**

## INTRODUCTION

Born in Santiago in 1942, Lucía Guerra has to date written two novels; *Más Allá de las Máscaras* (Santiago, 1984) and *Muñeca Brava* (Caracas, 1993) as well as a book of short stories, *Frutos Extraños* (Santiago, 1997). Guerra is also well known as a literary critic and is professor of Latin American literature at the University of California at Irvine. Her critical and creative work share the common thematic of impugning the cultural systems of power which work to reinforce the social subordination of women; Guerra's work seeks to undermine these cultural and linguistic hegemonies of oppression. Her narratives are also seen to employ an autoerotic discourse as a subversive element, (con) textualising the female body as a critical semantic locus.

I will examine both of Lucía Guerra's novels, beginning with *Más Allá de las Máscaras*.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: *MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS MÁSCARAS*

### INTRODUCTION

Appearing in 1984, the year following *Lumperica's* publication, *Más Allá De Las Máscaras* shares a certain similarity to Eltit's first novel in that it addresses the issue of the female condition while establishing the thematic concerns which will dominate its author's later work. A relatively short novel, *Más Allá De Las Máscaras* problematises the role and status of the female within a demonstrably repressive societal context, examining and denuding the artifice of the social constructs of gender and the machinations of power.

The protagonist of the novel is Cristina, who is also the wry narrator, a middle-class woman who relates the story of her "aventura" (p.9 <sup>(1)</sup>) which she elects to define in terms of what it is not: "Mi historia no tiene nada que ver con esas otras historias escritas por los hombres, ni las de alcoba, ni las de fusiles, ni las de laberintos en una biblioteca" (p.9). This approach is concordant with Guerra's theory of the historical constructs of femininity, posited as a lack, an absence of subjective identity.<sup>(2)</sup> In effect, Cristina is distancing herself not only from the standard modes of subjective definition, but from conventional narrative praxes, perhaps the most established of which is the presumption of the generically male gendered identity of the reader. Guerra subverts this assumption by consistently addressing the reader as 'señora', a technique also designed to encourage complicity between reader and textual subject.

Guerra adopts a direct style of discourse in her first novel; the narrative at times possesses a bald, testimonial quality as it charts the nascent personal and social awareness of the protagonist. Cristina's occupation as a journalist facilitates a metatextual approach, while key images are evoked throughout the novel - the mask, the mirror, the doll - emphasising stereotypically feminine preoccupations and the protagonist's exegesis of these stereotypes. A further narrative strategy often employed by Guerra is the assimilation of popular cultural trappings; song lyrics, radio scripts and newspaper excerpts are all incorporated. These, along with literary allusions (*The Second Sex*, *Anna Karenina*) inform and reinforce the protagonist's discourse, in illustrating conventional social mores and values.

## CONSTRUCTS OF GENDER

It is the artificial process of becoming a woman - the notion that gender is an artificially acquired commodity, as adumbrated in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* - that the narrator of *Más Allá De Las Máscaras* denudes. Before the ontological space 'beyond the masks' can be realised, the protagonist must first apprehend the socio-historical constructs which circumscribe her subjective identity; the narrative documents a heuristic and often tentative quest for a specifically female identity; "la verdadera feminidad" (p.102).

The masks of cultural tradition impose a mere facade of identity, obfuscating subjective integrity: "empecé a sentirme como un mimo ingenuo...me preguntaba, qué era yo, quién era..." (p.18). The concept of gender is construed on the basis of such constructs. The image of the physical aesthetic is the first of the constructs which the novel addresses; Cristina's doll, Ariadna, a constant companion since childhood, is the metonym of this imperative - she is the self in miniature, beautiful and rather sinister in her complicit silence. As a woman, Cristina has assimilated one of the fundamental tenets of femininity; she understands that her validity as a female is determined by her physical attractiveness, and consequently devotes considerable amounts of time to rituals of beauty; applying cosmetics, colouring her hair, attempting to defy the ageing process. The physical exigencies of femininity are continually reinforced by the cultural agents of mass media - the females who appear in films and advertisements are of an immaculate appearance, carefully contrived to conform to standards of beauty. In this way, the mirror which Cristina stares into in search of her 'self' reflects merely the 'other', the object, thus denying her subjective identity altogether. Ironically, on looking into the mirror, it is *she* who perpetuates this process of objectification, she who acts as the agent of her own subjugation: "son tus propios ojos los enemigos implacables" (p.13). Indeed, the theme of women's collusion in the cultural tradition is a recurrent one; until the age of thirty-four Cristina has complied with tenets of femininity which are essentially extraneous to herself as an individual. She accepts, for instance, the dichotomy of conventional sexual morality, tolerating her husband's infidelity and use of prostitutes. Her sole response is a vacuous and futile internalisation of resentment: "Mientras los hombres coleccionaban amantes que se iban añadiendo a sus preciados trofeos de virilidad, nosotras sólo podíamos acumular iras, nostalgias y sueños en un dormitorio vacío" (p.41). Silence, in fact, is a tactic to which

Cristina as a woman commonly resorts; in conversations with men, she judges that it is "Mejor callar" (p.72) in deference to men's need to satisfy "su tonta vanidad de hombre" (p.72), while characterising women's passage through life as "peregrinas que avanzan en la vida estrellándose contra los muros de lo no dicho" (p.65). The concept of silence is aligned with the traditional conceptions of femininity; negativity, passivity, absence. These are evinced in other aspects of Cristina's life; in her realisation that all historical icons are male (the absence of any statues of women) and that even the myth of maternity, "el goce sublime y eterno de la maternidad" (p.80), is ironised by the patriarchal system of nomenclature: "inventaron un núcleo familiar para sustentar su diabólica jerarquía de poder: el padre, la autoridad máxima, dueño y señor de la casa, la madre (señora de) pariendo hijos que no llevarían su apellido" (p.28). Silence, paradoxically, can also be seen as an assertive response, a strategy which could be considered legitimate in a context dominated by linguistic hegemony - the inherent sexism of the Castilian language (the masculine employed as a signifier of 'generic'), the ascendancy of certain specifically masculine words (Cristina has never heard the word 'filósofa', for example) and the ability of language to validate preconceptions of gender: "Fue entonces cuando descubrí la dualidad moral del lenguaje porque resultaba que 'cornuda' nunca había sido un insulto para nadie" (p.41). Yet Cristina's silence is not in truth a response to her realisation that "el idioma era un aliado incondicional de los hombres" (p.84), rather, it is a self-imposed form of censorship, a further token of her complicity with the patriarchal system. Cristina's attempts to divest her life of artificial constructs, masks, must involve a struggle not only with social configurations of gender but ultimately with herself, culpable in reproducing them.

## TRANSGRESSION

The very narrative of *Más Allá De Las Máscaras* has an inherently transgressive quality. This is evinced not only in the text's exposition of certain taboo themes - menstruation, for example, is discussed in vivid detail - but in the subjectivity of the female narratorial voice. The physicality and sexuality of the female protagonist are given expression in the occasional erotic content of the text; the female voice and body are inscribed as *subject*, within a dominant discourse which assigns the female to the domain of nihility; "al territorio de la palabra prohibida" (p.84). The theme of the subversiveness of the text is also given a metatextual treatment in Cristina's obviating the codes of censorship; she writes "sintiéndome una mujer astuta por mis estrategias que lograban burlar la

censura del gobierno" (p.93).

The greatest transgression which the protagonist commits is not that of renouncing the licit confines of marriage, but her purposeful relegation of men to the status most commonly held by women, that of physical (sexual) object: "mi propósito era usarlo, convertirlo en un instrumento...porque ya es hora, por la gran puta, que los hombres sean prácticos objetos sexuales" (p.77). Her recourse to promiscuity is thus motivated by a misguided desire for sexual equality ("sólo deseaba ser igual a los hombres" [p.69]) yet in adopting the wanton sexual conduct which she witnesses in men, she achieves little other than to confirm her maligned objectified status. Her attempt to negate and invalidate "todos los falsos mitos sobre la espiritualidad del sexo en la mujer" (p.69) fails on several levels; the protagonist is left debased, disabused and ostracised by both men and women alike. Once again, it is Cristina herself who is instrumental in her own defeat; she is incapable of realising what she considers to be sexual autonomy and of severing the social constructs which define the propriety of female sexual conduct. Despite her efforts to convey an attitude of liberalism and nonchalance, on her first sexual encounter with Antonio she is assuaged by feelings of guilt, and is later to substantiate the very 'myth' which she has set out to confute - she cannot keep from investing her sexual experiences with emotional significance, and describes her encounter with Antonio in deferential, and markedly spiritual, terms: "yo hacía eco al cántico de tu cuerpo" (p.51).

Cristina eventually concludes that the means to achieving true equality are not to be found "en esa burda imitación de la conducta de los hombres" (p.75). The reasons for this are contained within her own words; although no longer inhibited by her restrictive marriage, Cristina's life remains a mimesis of that of men, her desire for the "despojo de todas esas absurdas máscaras" (p.18) satisfied by effectively replacing these masks with others. She has 'progressed' merely from feigning the semblance of respectability to feigning that of libertinism, with both positions revealed as duplicitous masquerades of her true identity. This simulacrum inevitably engenders a scission of selfhood. Cristina begins to refer to herself in terms of ontological estrangement, of fractured identity: "Mientras la otra, como autómatas, escribía párrafos...yo me encerraba en una esfera luminosa" (p.46). She strives to reconcile this scission through alterity, in her relations with Antonio: "florecía toda yo (única, poderosa, yo, yo y tú, tú que eras yo)" (p.56). On the abrupt demise of the relationship, however, this strategy proves highly detrimental, and Cristina is left confronting a wholly inauthentic identity: "la

imagen reflejada en el espejo me pareció totalmente ajena a mí" (p.62).

But it is the transgression of silence rather than that of sexual conduct which concludes *Más Allá De Las Máscaras*. Cristina finally accesses a sense of herself not through a man but through a fellow woman, Aurora, named by Guerra to adumbrate a new beginning (the protagonist also meets this character "un asoleado día" [p.87])<sup>(3)</sup>. Aurora, a symbol of the generic "oprimidos" (p.93), the subaltern, transgresses women's relegation to the private, the silenced space, inhabiting the public forum with her leading of a hunger-strike and emboldening the protagonist in a vociferous display of political commitment: "antes que ná hay que gritar las cosas pa' que se sepan" (p.95). Ultimately, it is the female subject's violation of her conventional status of silence which constitutes the gravest transgression, symbolised by the deliberate killing (and therefore 'silencing') of the character of Aurora at the novel's end.

## CONCLUSION

*Más Allá De Las Máscaras* documents the inchoate emergence of a female identity which the protagonist struggles to define within a phallogocentric societal system. The dichotomy which Cristina faces appears self-validating and ineluctable; her identity is construed by pernicious social axioms, yet she cannot conceive of a means of ontological definition outwith the tacit boundaries of society, for no identity can be established within a vacuum. Confronting the monolithic nature of patriarchal ideology, Cristina constantly finds herself defeated: "El sistema me pareció implacable" (p.83); "...sin darme cuenta que luchaba en un campo de batalla donde mi derrota ya estaba prevista" (p.75).

Having failed to assert her identity within such a context, yet unable to return to her previous state of ignorance as regards social inflections of gender, Cristina experiences her life as an existential void; her "ansias...de Ser" (p.67) truncated, she describes her existence as "un mimo absurdo" (p.67), a phrase which connotes the image of women's lives as mimetic representation of men's, which are therefore held to be existentially authentic. Cristina's sense of an itinerant subjectivity is accentuated on various occasions throughout the novel, as, for instance, when she refers to the "laberinto...que hace de todas nosotras peregrinas" (p.65) or when she describes her life before meeting Aurora as an endless wandering through obscurity: "En esa época yo caminaba a oscuras por el mundo" (p.86). Her feelings of existential disengagement infuse Cristina's life

("Todo me parecía absurdo, hueco, engañoso" [p.80]), culminating in thoughts of complete self-effacement (thus complying, perversely, with the state of Non-Being) - death seems "como una nada tranquila, mucho más benigna que la nada de la vida acosada por las mentiras" (p.86).

The solution to ontological invalidity which *Más Allá De Las Máscaras* posits is that of political awareness and participation; the accretion of a female (and feminist) consciousness. Political undercurrents are indeed present throughout the novel - the allusion to the sale of arms to third world countries, Cristina's journey to Bolivia where she witnesses the corruption of the political system, the economic crisis and censorship imposed in her own country - yet Cristina repeatedly prioritises personal and emotional matters over any sense of political consciousness. (Her emotional immaturity is symbolically shattered at the end of the novel, with Cristina's deliberate act of smashing her doll.) Together with political awareness comes a female solidarity and complicity, reified by Cristina's aligning herself with Aurora, a woman of a lower social class. This act is employed by Guerra not only to demonstrate that a female collective transgresses traditional socio-political divisions, but to emphasise the comparable position of women with the subaltern within society; this equivalence is often underscored: "pensé que, por primera vez, la sociedad me mostraba sin eufemismos el lugar que me había asignado a mí como mujer, tan ciudadana de segunda categoría como los pobres" (p.100); "nunca había conocido de cerca esas vidas que corrían paralelas a la mía" (p.92).

Aligned with active political engagement is women's need to reinscribe themselves within society - the boundaries of subjective identity which define women as an effaced space, "una angustiante página en blanco" (p.87) must be redrawn. It is to this end that Aurora urges the protagonist: "Usted tiene poder con el lápiz, escriba más" (p.93). In Cristina's attempt to "narrarme a mí misma" (p.102), to actuate an existence free of masks, what she undertakes is no less than a resemanticisation of the epithet of 'female', a process which Lucía Guerra is to continue in her second novel, published almost a decade later.

**NOTES: CHAPTER SEVEN - MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS MÁSCARAS**

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *Más Allá de las Máscaras*, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1993.
2. For an explanation of Guerra's theory, see "Las sombras de la escritura: hacia una teoría de la producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana", *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Hernán Vidal (Series Literature and Human Rights 4), Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989, 129 - 164
3. This observation is also made by Gloria Gálvez-Carlisle, in "Si nos permiten hablar: Los espacios silenciados y la deconstrucción del discurso del silencio en la narrativa de Lucía Guerra", *Revista Iberoamericana*, 60, no. 168 - 169 (1994): p.1073 - 79

## CHAPTER EIGHT: *MUÑECA BRAVA*

### INTRODUCTION

Published in 1993, *Muñeca Brava* is set in Santiago de Chile in 1985, at the height of government hostilities and repression. The novel, whose title is taken from the lyrics of a tango, centres on the lives of three female characters, Martina, Alda and Meche, who work as prostitutes in the district of the city known locally as "la calle de la noche" (p.11 <sup>(1)</sup>). Although they share the common bond of marginality, the women are delineated as individual figures from diverse backgrounds, making their intense alliance, which undergirds and lends cohesion to the narrative, all the more politically significant (the text's thematic nub is the movement towards the liberation of women through the harnessing of a collective feminine effort). The novel recounts the developing political consciousness of the women, whose lives first intersect while they are being held prisoner in a concentration camp which has been established with the objective of investigating fully the deviancy of prostitution (at the personal whim of the unidentified dictator, a barely-concealed parody of Augusto Pinochet).

*Muñeca Brava* comprises a variety of narrative strategies, which include the recourse to vernacular speech, parallelisms, satire, and the use of humour and myth. The novel opens with the first-person account of Chile itself, personified as the violated body of a woman ("la sangre me corre por entre las piernas" [p.9]) - this technique is repeated again at the beginning of the subsequent two chapters. Although an extra-diegetic narrator relates most of the novel, on occasion the reader is given direct access to the thoughts of the characters, as, for instance, when the stream-of-consciousness technique is employed during Alda's interrogation and transferral to the torture house. Similarly, the rendering of the dictator's speeches without any recourse to authorial intervention accentuates their intrinsically ludicrous quality, while heightening the immediacy of the situation for the reader. Analepsis too is employed, often as an aetiological means of providing explicatory details as regards the women's current situation.

The first of the themes to be examined is the portrayal of the three female characters who form the text's foundation.

## MARGINALITY: THE FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THE WORLD OF PROSTITUTION

The characters of Martina, Alda and Meche represent diverse aspects of the ancestral image of the 'fallen woman', the prostitute, extant since pre-Biblical times and firmly rooted in human consciousness: "El rito de la fornicatriz, de la hetaira y de la concubina" (p.12); "La imagen cíclica de la mercancía de los cuerpos" (p.13). Prostitution throughout the novel is considered within this context; the wizened Martina, brazen Alda and rather lachrymose Meche viewed simply as passive agents swept along in the tides of history (this imagery is often employed: "el flujo marginal de todos los tiempos" [p.61]; "las aguas detenidas desde siempre" [p.12]). The women are linked not only through their choice of profession, but through their common personal histories which are characterised by physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as through their social status of marginality. Inhibited by their lack of education (the women's ignorance is often revealed, epitomised by Meche's being unaware of having lost her virginity) together with the narrowly defined range of occupations available to women within society (Alda turns to prostitution "porque la única otra alternativa que tuve en la vida fue ser empleada doméstica" [p.118]) the recourse to prostitution becomes economically expedient.

The depiction of prostitution in the novel is at times ambivalent. Continuing the theme of her previous novel, Guerra impugns the cultural paradigm of female perfection - the cosmetically flawless mannequin - using the narratorial voice to create the impression of ironic distance. Patriarchal social imperatives define the female body as a commercial commodity, and in this sense the women are merely anticipating (and turning to account) these imperatives. Yet, like Cristina before her in *Más Allá de las Máscaras*, Alda, in her growing self-awareness, comes to realise the pernicious implications of conformity with the corporeal paradigm; the hours she has invested in applying cosmetics are revealed as a dissembling simulacrum, a disingenuous means of concealing the existential void of her life: "había invertido innumerables horas de su vida en la vacía rutina de maquillarse la cara" (p.108). Similarly, the narrative at times tends towards a portrayal of the women as the exploitative agents in "el ámbito eterno del negocio de los cuerpos" (p.12), exploiting both the Virgin/ Whore dichotomy traditionally accorded to women, as well as the men themselves as a mere source of income: "ellos pa' mí son un par de billetes y nada más" (p.66). (The image of the women

as exploited commodities is also lessened by the fact that it is a woman, rather than a man, who runs the brothel, and she is often depicted as being sympathetic towards her employees.) However, despite the text's suggestion of the women's agency, essentially they remain figures who wilfully cultivate an objectified perception of women (the inert image of the doll exemplifies this tendency) and inevitably suffer the accordant results, which in *Muñeca Brava* are particularly extreme - imprisonment, murder and rape.

The central thematic concern of *Muñeca Brava*, however, is not that of prostitution itself, rather, this theme is appropriated by Guerra as a means of exploring the generic issues of marginality and oppression. The women of the street of night hold the status of social debris; figures whom social consciousness has attempted to expel: "Todos los huevones la tratan a una como si fuera un maniquí de carne y hueso que, después que se usa, se tira a la basura" (p.66). Their level of education is negligible - one woman has to read out public slogans to her companions who are unable to read - and they are denied any public means of expression, both by their nature of work ("les está estrictamente prohibido hablar" [p.11]) and by the canons of a particularly masculine hegemony (detained in the camp, the women walk "sin pronunciar una sola palabra" (p.48). Yet the women are gradually revealed to be a subversive corpus, not only in their flouting of normative morality (which has been extraneously established: "no debemos olvidar tampoco que las leyes de la moral las han hecho los hombres, no las mujeres" [p.68]) and in their participation in the resistance movement, but in their deliberate celebration of the "santo oficio" (p.150) of prostitution. This is most clearly demonstrated in the wake held in honour of Martina; with resonances of the Eucharistic rite ("Este es tu cuerpo, Martina" [p.15]), the women's language is a mocking, parodic commentary on the principles of Marianism: "Sagrada tú, entre todas las mujeres, revolcándote en las sábanas siempre con un hombre diferente" (p.150). The women are seen to utilise their marginality - symbolised by their cosmetics, lipstick and eye-pencil - as a tool of protest; thus the messages scrawled in cosmetics on a public wall can be read as a form of social inscription. Once again, it is only through a collective effort that the women are able to gain any subversive influence; it is significant that Alda dies as a result of abandoning her fellow women in an individual attempt to effect change.

### **HEGEMONY: THE MILITARY REGIME**

The hegemonic world of the military regime is presented as the antithesis

to the marginalised world of prostitution; the axioms and imperatives of the hegemonic authority barely apprehended by the subaltern who vaguely intuit such a power as "ese otro mundo" (p.13). Even the geographical location of the two worlds attests to the division of power - the prostitutes occupy a peripheral "rincón de la ciudad" (p.11), distanced from the central, monopolising axis of authority: "ignoran las regulaciones proferidas en el centro de la ciudad por el hombre" (p.11).

Both the literal and metaphorical centre are occupied by a presence which is singularly masculine, reified in the characters of the military. The inflexibility and intransigence of these individual figures are frequently emphasised (the dictator's "rígido paso militar" [p.13] and the repeated image of the black boot), traits which find their culminating expression in the regimented discipline of the military paradigm; "un duro coro de voces ordena al unísono" (p.18). The connection made between the association of masculinity with sexual dominance (and often misogyny) is explicitly portrayed: "esta tierra de hombres verdaderos" (p.25) affirm their sense of masculinity through wilful suppression of women. Guerra underscores this association in her description of the soldiers; in carrying out a military operation, one officer "se yergue erecto" (p.18) while the others are described as "figuras masculinas erguidas" (p.19). The soldiers' conversations too are imbued with sexual connotations, a phrase denoting sexual violence commonly employed as an expression of general dominance, for example, one man asserts that his sports team "le van a sacar la cresta a los rojos" (p.84). The link between the military and misogyny even extends to the conception of the land itself - the dictator refers to the 'la patria' as being "intacta y virgen" (p.14) (The paradox of the fatherland being in this condition is never resolved, although the passages opening each chapter, in which the land is conceptualised as a violated female body, work to undermine it.)

The phallogocentric nature of the official discourse perpetuates a system of hierarchies; a Manichaeic order in which the world is configured in terms of binarisms - it is in this sense that Arreola lives by the simplistic principle of "Vencer o morir" (p.157). The most deeply entrenched binarism to emerge from Chilean society under the military is that of gender division: if masculinity is construed on the foundations of violence and intransigence, femininity is delineated in terms of passivity and compliance. The corollary of these latter characteristics, of course, is insignificance and invalidity. The dictator is inclined to dismiss reports of public protests staged by women in the capital, as women

simply do not present any political threat: "Pero a las mujeres no hay que hacerles caso" (p.99). Where men's sphere is the world of activity and enterprise, women are confined by the limits imposed by biological determinism: "las mujeres no son más que vientre y vagina...que las destinan...a ser madres o prostitutas" (p.39). It is this ideology that informs the dictator's public panegyrics extolling feminine virtues of docility, maternal love and domesticity (the tenets of essentialism also confirm the innate intellectual inferiority of women). The edifying discourse of the General, however, is ironised on two levels by the narrative; firstly by the presence of the prostitutes in the front row of the audience (who somewhat negate the validity of the General's assertions that women are sanctified beings) and secondly by the very actions of the men themselves. Women, as divinely created beings who merit the reverence of men, are in practice reduced to the status of animals. This is revealed both in the language used by men to refer to women ("perras en celo" [p.16]) and in the recurrent motif of women's association with animals throughout the text (for example, Alda's comment in reference to the soldiers' treatment of the women: "y nos echan en las camiones como si hubieran estado echando animales pa'l matadero" [p.22]). In particular, the imagery of birds is employed; at one point the women are described as "aves atolondradas" (p.53), while a later reference to birds painted in a range of different colours and kept in a cage is an unambiguous allusion to the prostitutes themselves. (These references have been adumbrated in the novel by the depiction of Arreola as a child, dissecting dead birds and experiencing "un extraño placer" [p.25] in destroying the eggs he discovers in females' stomachs.)

The phallogocentric system evinced by the military would also appear to be detrimental to men themselves, or at the very least, founded on masculine insecurities. The two central military figures in *Muñeca Brava*, the General and Arreola, both display behaviour arising as a direct result of their own ontological anxieties; in the dictator's case, there is the suggestion that his phobia regarding clowns (in addition to being a narrative strategy designed to emphasise the risible quality of his leadership) is engendered by his deep insecurity about his own sexuality. He feels the need to affirm his naturally potent masculinity, "Yo he sido siempre un hombre a toda prueba" (p.15), yet divulges his hatred of clowns in terms which insinuate that his antipathy towards them derives from their ostensibly homosexual nuances: "con esa voz de falsete tan insoportable" (p.15). Similarly, it is Arreola's insecurity about his sexual prowess, as well as his own ontological uncertainties, which lead to his sexual encounters with Alda: "los gemidos regocijados de esa mujer lo habían hecho sentirse dueño del mundo y de

sí mismo" (p.92). It is Alda's exploitation and manipulation of these insecurities which save her life and ultimately cause Arreola's downfall. To compensate for these insecurities (which in the General's case must be regarded as bordering on the pathological, given his response to clowns) both men resort to a process of self-deification. Arreola's sexual violence and refuge in pedantry ("que lo hacían ser poseedor de una tajada más del mundo" [p.24]) both fortify his sense of divine eminence, while the dictator's self-apotheosis - he is "el único redentor" (p.98), immersed in "la sagrada misión de salvarse a nuestra patria" (p.13) - is to prove pernicious to the entire country, fostering the conception of truth as a monolithic entity.

### THE FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Throughout the text of *Muñeca Brava* there are various allusions to mythic female figures and archetypes; Deborah the seer of the Book of Judges, Eve, Lilith and the Virgin Mary. As well as evincing the invocation of a 'hidden' female history inherent to the novel, these figures are employed as a means of manipulating the official religious discourse; the tenets of the Church are often ironised, for example, in Alda's wry supposition that Christ must by definition have been a client of Mary Magdalene. Conventional religiosity is represented by the characters of Meche and doña Leonor, yet significantly, by the end of the novel Meche has renounced her faith in God while doña Leonor rejects pacific principles on the grounds that the doctrines of quietism are extraneous to Chile's current situation: "Dios no se da abasto para poner fin a tanto mal" (p.69). The Virgin Mary as a paragon of femininity is also rejected; to Alda she seems a redundant figure, "cuya belleza y pesado ropaje eran como un disfraz que la separaba absolutamente de todas las otras mujeres" (p.69). In her place the novel promotes the symbology of the Great Goddess, personified by the triad of women - the young blond Meche the maiden, the more mature Alda as the mother (she regards Meche as a daughter) and the hoary Martina as the crone. Alda herself alludes to this allegory of the women, in her remark that the three of them are "unidas como el agua, la tierra y la luna" (p.78). Indeed, it is an ancient telluric wisdom which the women are seen to wield, manifested in spells, spiritual intervention and exorcisms. The fact that there are precisely three chapters to the novel could also be seen as a continuation of this symbolism.

The need for a specifically female consciousness is evident in a context dominated by the particularly masculine artifices of power (the military

Government, the Church). However, the image of the Goddess is also deployed as a means of accentuating the intrinsically cyclical nature of oppression and abuse. The concept of the cycle is evoked on various occasions; the narrative establishes a subtle link between the figure of Meche's grandmother, forced into marriage by her parents, and the character of Martina, who was to suffer the same fate at age thirteen. Undergoing interrogation and the threat of torture in the concentration camp, Martina envisions herself as a witch burning at the stake, the archetypal image of the persecuted woman. Thus "la rutina ancestral" (p.12) of prostitution also refers to a long-established social configuration of power from which women are most often excluded.

The public/ private dichotomy informs the feminist discourse of the novel; the private realm of domesticity is epitomised by Martina, an old woman who is confined to venting her frustrations into the cooking pot and whose cloistered existence is threatened by the changes beginning to insinuate themselves in society. Martina comes to realise the limitations of her condition; "Pensando que la anciana tenía razón al decir que eran los puros hombres los que trajinaban por el mundo mientras las mujeres quedaban encerradas en la casa" (p.103), yet is unable to actuate any means of surmounting them. The same inertia is found in the character of Ester, Arreola's wife, (chosen for her suitability in the category of "Sumisa y buena madre" [p.26]) and in Alda's mother, inhibited by a social system which ensures her economic dependence on a philandering, financially-irresponsible husband. Professional opportunities as such for women do not exist - only ancillary and poorly-paid positions are available to them, evinced by Alda's option of becoming a housemaid or a secretary, and even by the figure of doña Leonor, a woman perceived as being of a superior class to the 'putas' yet who is employed as a receptionist to her son, a doctor. For women who remain within the private sphere of domesticity, the position of ostensible authority accorded to them there is, as Alda points out, entirely spurious: "Nunca he entendido por qué mierda las llaman dueñas de casa cuando no son dueñas de nada" (p.64). The figure of the prostitute, of course, transgresses this relegation to the private - she is "una mujer pública" (p.34) and as such poses a distinct threat to established authority. Yet the relationship of the military to the prostitutes is merely the metaphorisation of wider gender relations - the soldiers are to be identified as the agents of patriarchy: "Los hombres pasan por encima de uno igual que los milicos cuando desfilan el día de la patria" (p.65). It is in this sense that the street of night is described as "este nuevo campo de batalla" (p.18) upon the soldiers' invasion; the battle is as much that of men and women as it is that of hegemony and

marginality. Thus the street of night is the microcosmic representation of a much wider problematic, the interpersonal relationships of its inhabitants simply the condensation of the social dynamics of an entire country: "<<Si todo eso y mucho más puede ocurrir entre dos personas, qué será cuando se trata de un país entero>>" (p.121).

## CONCLUSION

On the very first page of *Muñeca Brava* the voice of Chile declares itself a static entity, impervious to the social and historical vicissitudes surrounding it: "Fija. / Detenida" (p.9). That the personified voice of Chile is in the feminine makes this testimony of immobility and immutability all the more pertinent, as throughout the novel it is the feminine which is arrested (in torture camps, in brothels, in domesticity) by the constructs of a racinated form of patriarchy. It is this social system which determines the configuration of identity; thus all the female characters are defined not subjectively, but through their relation to men - whether as wives, mothers, or as objects of lust and experimentation. This form of assigning identity is epitomised in the attitudes held by Arreola, who apprehends the notion of female identity as being axiomatically "atadas a un placer masculino" (p.39).

Like the plaza of *Lumpérica*, the brothel within *Muñeca Brava* is employed as the image of a social interstice, a politicised locus. The inhabitants of the brothel occupy a marginal social space whose existence is merely tacit: "su calidad de espacio borrado" (p.61). Their silence is both symbolic (the inscription on the wall by a prostitute who writes in lower case and parentheses) and literal (Martina's and Meche's mute responses under interrogation). Yet the brothel also functions as a metonymical representation of the iniquities of the patriarchal system, which not only oppresses women but which also brutalises men (Alda informs Arreola that her occupation often involves consoling male clients who frequent the brothel simply for the comfort of human contact). According to Guerra, it is only by instating the female voice and denouncing the commodious recourse to silence that the pernicious rhetoric of patriarchy can be overcome.

The enunciation of the female voice may take several forms. It may involve participation in an anonymous expression of social discontent, as evinced by the collective banging of pots and pans on the eleventh of every month. (It is also significant that this display takes place from within the confines of the

domestic context.) It may involve the individual's assuming responsibility for the ongoing process of self-enlightenment and awareness of the politicisation of their own lives - this is revealed at various points throughout the novel, for instance, in Alda's comprehension of the imperatives of power; "empezó a comprender el mundo en términos del impulso nefasto del poder" (p.121), in the women's new-found interest in following radio broadcasts in order to be "informadas de la situación nacional" (p.57), and in Julieta's insistence that the women should grasp the generic significance of their actions: "esto lo debemos tomar como un asunto estrictamente político" (p.125). It may even involve militant action; the narrative of *Muñeca Brava* is a rousing call to women's active political involvement, as a means of inverting and subverting the axioms of power (the women achieve this through their alliance forged while being held prisoner, thus negating the torturer's prerogative, and through Alda's recourse to her own body, after being raped, to engender Arreola's downfall). It is in her engagement with the political that Alda obviates her onerous sense of ennui: "Estoy convencida que lo más lindo de la vida es hacer cosas, sentir que uno ha movido algo...En cambio allá en la casa uno nunca cambia nada" (p.64). The sense of ontological affirmation which political commitment provides negates the prevalent system which defines women solely in terms of their relation to men, and is also a means of impeding the sense of existential anxiety which is recurrent throughout the novel. This is particularly relevant to women, who are often depicted as existentially despondent. Martina is undoubtedly the most extreme example; "La felicidad es una burla de Dios" (p.41); "Pura mierda tiene uno que tolerar en esta vida" (p.21), but her sentiments find resonances in doña Rosa's assertions; "éste es un valle de lágrimas y no hemos venio aquí sino para sufrir" (p.32) and in Meche's later apathy towards her own survival. At times even Alda exhibits such tendencies, as when she refers to "esa otra Gran Puta, con mayúscula, la verdadera puta, la Gran Puta de este mundo que nos jode a todos" (p.83). But through her active role in the resistance movement, through engaging with a wider social consciousness, Alda achieves a means of eluding the great simulacrum which life has become, and of subverting the female condition of 'Not-Being' <sup>(2)</sup> ("Pero si ni siquiera somos" [p.66]). If man's destiny is diachronic, linear, the progressive inventor "de todo aquello que se erige verticalmente hacia las alturas" (p.39), women's must be cyclical, represented by the image of the primordial mirror: "ahora daba a luz una brecha que se insertaba en el otro tiempo, horizontal e irrepitable, de los sucesos históricos" (p.39) (note the primacy of the female experience - the image of giving birth, the reference to the 'other'). What Guerra advocates in *Muñeca Brava* is a new epistemology of femininity; in "ese enredo de lanas desovilladas que era

ahora la vida" (p.102), women must be taught to take up the threads of their own history.

**NOTES: CHAPTER EIGHT - MUÑECA BRAVA**

1. All page numbers provided in this chapter refer to *Muñeca Brava*, Caracas, Monte Avila Latinoamericana, 1993.
2. Guerra defines this condition as "la dicotomía clásica del pensamiento falocéntrico en el que Ser mujer equivale a No-Ser" - see "Las sombras de la escritura: hacia una teoría de la producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana", *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Hernán Vidal (Series Literature and Human Rights 4), Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989, p.134

**IV**

**PÍA BARROS**

## INTRODUCTION

Born in Chile in 1956, Pía Barros was a prominent figure of the post-coup literary generation, perhaps best known within Chile for her work as a 'tallerista' who directed countless literary workshops throughout the 1980's and 90's. Before publishing her first novel *El Tono Menor del Deseo* in 1991, she had written only short stories - the collections *Miedos Transitorios* (1986) and *A Horcajadas* (1990) - many of which have been anthologised.

Barros is a vociferous defender of equal rights, championing a brand of feminism which is accordant with and pertinent to the Latin American referent.<sup>(1)</sup> The feminist discourse of her work impugns hierarchical categorisations, conforming to the postmodernist ideology which posits the absence of a cohesive, integrated subjectivity, accentuating in its place the notion of a mutable gendered identity. The text is apprehended as a refractory medium: "escribo por rebeldía a las normas, a los cánones, a la familia"<sup>(2)</sup>. Central to Barros' thematic is the concept of re-appropriation; of the body, and of the language essential to define ontological boundaries: "si las escritoras no son capaces de nombrar su cuerpo, revertirlo, reusarlo, si no se disponen a apropiarse de ese cuerpo a través del lenguaje, no pueden crear literatura al punto de reinventarse, exorcisarse y llegar a un código sin máscaras para decir lo que quieren ser"<sup>(3)</sup>.

*El Tono Menor del Deseo* is the last of the texts which I will be considering.

**NOTES: PÍA BARROS**

1. In regard to this subject, Barros has stated in an interview with Guillermo García-Corales: "Más que la norteamericana o europea, me interesa la teoría de las latinas en sus propios textos. Esto viene de reconocer la inoperancia de aplicar modelos de conducta o pensamiento al tercer mundo que vienen empaquetados del primer mundo", see "La Lucha Por la Inclusión de la Literatura Femenina Actual: El Caso de Pía Barros", *Revista Monográfica*, vol. 13, 1997, p.397
2. Ibid., p.400
3. Ibid., p.402

## CHAPTER NINE: *EL TONO MENOR DEL DESEO*

### INTRODUCTION

*El Tono Menor del Deseo*, first published in 1991, in a sense provides a conflation of many of the thematic concerns in the work of the three authors previously considered; the significance of the act of writing as a means of recomposing a fractured identity, the subject/ object dyad, the disunity of the (female) subject under (phallographic) politically repressive regimes, and the eroticisation of the female subject as a subversive strategy. Privileging the female voice, the novel is constructed by an occasionally self-referential narrator who inscribes herself as a textual entity, employing a visceral discourse in which the 'deseo' of the title is not merely construed as sexual; it is indeed the desire for the unity of a displaced subjectivity.

The narrative is composed of alternating accounts detailing the thoughts and impulses of three individual protagonists; the first referred to simply as 'la mujer del espejo', Catalina, a seventy-year-old woman, and Melva, a subject undergoing torture. (Although there are no overt references to the Chilean political situation, implicit within the novel is a tacit context of repression, silence and fear.) These alternating accounts promote a pluralist perspective, while a cyclical order is suggested by the repetitive nature of the narrative structure; the sections invariably succeed one another in the same order, while the novel concludes describing the character with which it began. A certain narrative unity is also fostered by the points of correspondence which exist between the characters. Minor details transpire which are seen to associate the three women, such as the motifs of rain, swings and birds. These links are tenuous, however, and are undermined by the lack of intra-diegetic communication - Catalina and Melva have met but never articulate their mutual interest, and none of the characters are ever reconciled.

I will briefly examine the depictions of each of the narrative constructs, the first of which is the unnamed 'mujer del espejo'.

### LA MUJER DEL ESPEJO

The appellation accorded to this figure denotes her status as a metonymic representation of the generic female subject. As such, her physical features are

barely alluded to; we learn only that she is no longer in her youth and that she has long hair (a traditional symbol of femininity). The title 'la mujer del espejo' has a further resonance - the preposition 'del' attesting to the woman's position as a possession of the mirror itself. Throughout much of the narrative she is engaged in the process of attempting to liberate herself from the mirror's agency, attempting to (re)construct an identity which has become fragmented to such an extent that she experiences disassociation: "esa otra que no era ella" (p.14 <sup>[1]</sup>). What sense of subjective identity she does possess is deemed wholly negative: "Ella quisiera partir también, no tener nombre ni culpa, ninguna de las dos señas de identidad que tanto la acosan..." (p.45). The protagonist's quest to recover ontological wholeness is 'mirrored' by the narrator's search for narrative unity; the narrator states explicitly on the first page of the novel: "debo encontrar el 'tono mayor' que se pide a una novela" (p.9). Thus the narrative stance, "mi ojo-cuerpo de mujer" (p.9), becomes a specular game where the gaze of the narrator and that of textual subject elide in a "juego eterno, transgresor" (p.14), creating an interminable *mise-en-abyme* in which even 'truth' becomes a fluid and refracted commodity: "Cuál de las dos es ella, de qué lado está la verdad" (p.11). The result is a confusion of diageses; the narrator's identification with the woman ("Los pequeños fragmentos que recomponen a la mujer del espejo (¿a mí?)" [p.9]) transgressing normative narrative conventions: "Tal vez quisiera llorar, pero no sé, no sé si es ella o yo, ya no hay límites" (p.48). Further intra-textual points of correspondence are also established between the two. Barros accentuates the reciprocity with the frequent use of parentheses in relation to this protagonist, a textual device which suggests occlusion and obfuscation, apt for such a character. In an imbrication of textual identities, page becomes mirror ("el lenguaje de los cuerpos" [p.125]) and mirror becomes palimpsest (the woman inscribes words on her own body), while the woman's recourse to masturbation simulates the narrator's onanistic inscriptions in physically writing the text.

The mirror itself is sited within a dark room into which an oppressive city encroaches through a single window. Although precise details as regards the city are scant, the existence of the window is essential in the narrative; investing the woman's environment with an implicit social presence which informs her actions. Her voluntary 'encierro' or wilful exile within the confines of the room can be read as a form of self-censorship, as too can the ritualistic act of cutting off her hair (which, significantly, she limits to a single strand, adumbrating her eventual liberation). The events which transpire within the room possess a strong ritualistic quality, with the mirror employed as the limen through which the woman must

pass in order to proceed to her initiation as an autonomous, independent female subject. This can only be realised through resolving the inherent dichotomy which the mirror comprises; it is simultaneously an affirmatory tool, as evinced by the woman's undressing before it to "probar que es" (p.93), and a reductive device, which truncates her identity to that of a mimetic entity whose utter compliance is ensured: "como si su identidad dependiera de la imagen que le muestre de sí misma" (p.13). Even masturbation in front of the mirror, which is an autoerotic and therefore subversive act, is bound by this dichotomy, as the woman remains at once subject and object. Ultimately, the woman is able to resolve the dichotomy by shattering the mirror itself. (Might the cut and bleeding hand of the woman following this action symbolise the wound of the writing hand under censorship?) Yet the metaphorisation of the mirror ("El espejo puede tener más de doscientos años" [p.9]), symbolising the racinated history of the female condition, suggests that the woman's shattering of the mirror is not in itself sufficient: "La mujer que escribo quiebra en dos su sometimiento, aunque sepa que él, astillado o inexistente, estará mostrándole a cada instante las formas trucadas con que envejece" (p.140). This condition is delineated as one of absence and negation: "debe ser a oscuras, mujer-sombra, negación, ser lo que no se es, no ser, blanco o negro, los binarismos recurrentes" (p.46) and characterised by a sense of existential estrangement: "este destierro de sí misma" (p.124); "para siempre el horror de no pertenecerse" (p.109). Indeed, 'la mujer del espejo' throughout the text is defined by what she did *not* do; never having consummated her desire for the distant man in her memories. The woman's attempts to construct an identity by dredging the historical memory or consciousness ("para ella sólo el recuerdo es verdad" [p.50]) are axiomatically doomed to failure, for the collective female memory is a mere simulacrum; an ineffable void: "las mentes de mujer no recuperan la historia, son silencios, largos, inútiles, desgarrados silencios" (p.109). It is precisely against this "tono menor...esta historia sin historia" (p.9) that the novel is written; by articulating the self, by shattering the mirror, the imperatives defining the female subject are re-inscribed.

## CATALINA

It is the chary character of Catalina who is deployed by Barros to highlight the pertinence of the theme of exile to the female condition. Catalina's physical separation from the country of her childhood is depicted as concomitant with that of her self-estrangement; even at the age of seventy, her exile from selfhood persists: "exiliada como entonces del recuerdo de todos" (p.15). Her ontological

exile is engendered by the authority of her intransigent husband who rejects her sexually on her thirtieth birthday (informing her "eres una vieja" [p.16]), an event which is to foreclose all possibility of Catalina's reconciliation with the exiled or excised self ("ya no fue posible el regreso" [p.16]).

Catalina's domestic confinement is the reification of her existential confinement; the correspondence is exemplified by her storing the books she surreptitiously reads in secret corners of the house (if the correlation drawn in the novel between writing/ literature and the self is applied to this character, what she is effectively concealing are chapters of her own identity). Catalina's condition of existential inanition ("había hecho de su vida una larga espera" [p.53]) is curbed only by her liberation from her husband following his death - the result is a frantic buying and reading of books, as the house undergoes a physical and visceral 'apertura'. The house/ self becomes a literal site of resistance, hosting the covert meetings of a political resistance movement and filling with voices, words and conversations. The appropriation of the word is seen as inherent to the recovery of a sense of identity; Catalina "siempre sintió admiración por las palabras, ordenadas, escritas, simbólicas" (p.99) and articulates herself in a notebook: "refundada en cada palabra" (p.102). She finds existential validation through her integration into the collective, as alterity becomes an affirmatory mirror: "Catalina se empapa de otros" (p.102).

Yet Catalina's sense of fulfilment, provided by her active role in the resistance, proves merely transient, and at the novel's conclusion she is portrayed as a displaced soul, distracted and bewildered, searching for the disappeared Melva. Her ultimate desire, which, significantly, is never satisfied, is that of recovering the lost identity which Melva represents: "tienen tanto de qué hablar, tantas mentiras en común, tanto que aprender la una de la otra" (p.131). Catalina's search ("pasea y recorre una y otra vez la ciudad" [p.132]) is the eternal ricocheting of the most fundamental binarism; self and other ("una" and "otra") - in effect, the characters of Catalina and Melva constitute distinct aspects of the woman in the mirror, discrete shards of the same fragmented whole.

## MELVA

This theme of the self/ other dichotomy also resonates throughout the discourse of Melva, a discourse characterised by the sense of a displaced subjectivity, of a disarticulated voice. The image of the fragmented self ("ella que

dejaba atrás en ese preciso instante para ser yo" [p.23]) is hypostatized by the alternating of the first-person monologic account with the third-person perspective; a juxtaposition in keeping with the character's particular ontology ("a ella le hubiera gustado ser otra persona" [p.41]). Much of Melva's discourse is informed by the insistent recurrence of the concept of the 'other'; she is herself a social construct, defined and delineated by others as a lascivious character (she is "el deseo constante de los otros" [p.20] and "imaginada por los otros" [p.20]), dissembling a veneer of self-confidence "para que no pudieran herirla las miradas ajenas" [p.39]). Also present within the ontological kaleidoscope are the character's own desire for alterity; "tiene que existir un lugar donde sea posible ser en otro" (p.91) and the 'tú' persona of the torturer whom Melva is addressing. As Melva is the subject and narrator of her own discourse, this male 'tú' is axiomatically construed as 'other', a neat (and subversive) inversion of the theory postulated by de Beauvoir. <sup>(2)</sup>

The physical torture inflicted on Melva is the culmination of Barros' technique of depicting the corporealisation of patriarchal imperatives. As a sexually assertive female character ("mi cuerpo sí puedo nombrarlo" [p.36]) Melva is socially condemned as scabrous and shameful; rejected by her family and other members of society, she becomes a negated entity, an effaced identity. Barros employs this character not only as a token of the female condition, but as a symbol of the negated spaces of social consciousness - the events, facts and even words excised from the collective memory to which Melva repeatedly refers.

The politicisation of the female body is epitomised by Melva's dyad of dissident strategies: her silence under interrogation (she elects not to reveal her comrades' names) and her sexual inciting of her torturer (by whom she is repeatedly raped). By withholding speech and fabricating events she sublates the ostensibly heuristic intention of her torturers; appropriating, manipulating and denuding language, distorting its communicative premise and rendering its hegemonic associations redundant: "las mentiras y las palabras...el silencio de las palabras" (p.23); "qué te importa lo que digo, no me creas nada, esta es otra de mis mentiras" (p.41).

## CONCLUSION

*El Tono Menor del Deseo* comes to an end at what is, in a sense, a rather inchoate point; 'la mujer del espejo' is depicted as abandoning the house, clutching

a suitcase filled with the broken remnants of the mirror. The fact that this occurs at dawn enhances the sense of circuitry present within the narrative, while the woman's leaving the house, contemporaneous with the narrator's 'leaving' the story, reinforces the sense of reciprocity between the two (it also seems to point to the partial resolving of the self/ other dichotomy, in the reconciliation of the two textual entities).

The novel's concluding at the point where a new journey is just commencing - as implied by the dawn of a new day and the suitcase - suggests that the text itself constitutes merely the first stage in a long process of constructing a coherent female consciousness. Text, language, the establishing of a female lexicon, are essential in this process ("con todo el futuro que ofrece la página en blanco" [p.109]) but are not in themselves sufficient: "palabras huecas, vacías cáscaras de palabras" (p.106); "sólo las palabras le quedan, un lenguaje vacío" (p.133). The fundamental desire to which the novel's title alludes is that of surmounting the female condition of historical negation ("Añora ser recordada" [p.107]) and of thus achieving ontological authenticity. According to *El Tono Menor del Deseo*, this can only be realised through the re-appraisal of the past, the re-inscription of the axioms of the social contract.

**NOTES: CHAPTER NINE - *EL TONO MENOR DEL DESEO***

1. All page numbers provided in brackets in this chapter refer to *El Tono Menor del Deseo*, Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1991.
2. As explicated in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (London, Picador, 1988).

## CONCLUSION: INSCRIBING IDENTITIES

The most contiguous thematic compulsions of the novels considered in this thesis have been those concerned with the configuration of identity; national, communal and individual. An identity which has been modified, compromised and degraded by the praxes of authoritarianism, and one which becomes doubly equivocal for the female subject struggling to assert a valid subjectivity amidst not only the crisis of the national identity, but the pernicious genderic inflections of an intransigent phallogocentric social system.

The texts studied have revealed a tangible concatenation in the authors' preoccupations with identity. Most salient is the theme of renegotiating a sense of authenticity within a dominant system that has deformed all established models of social signification, and which has thus dismantled all hitherto accepted symbolic and cultural codes. Consequently, the authors address the essential dialectic of hegemony and marginality – the tensions between the legitimated public space and the negation of the 'no lugar' – and the issue of whether hegemony can be subverted by a female subject whose position remains essentially peripheral. (It is this position of subalterity, of ontological and cultural estrangement, that the epithet of 'sudaca' comes to denote in *El Cuarto Mundo*.) This theme of marginalisation, of course, is imbricated with that of exile and 'destierro'; a physical reality in the case of Allende but one which is symbolically appropriated by Eltit, Guerra and Barros alike. Central too to the authors' concerns is the theme of language, that is, the strategies adopted in attempting to overcome the national and individual condition of disarticulation, the linguistic distortions engendered by the unremitting rhetoric of the official discourse, the ineffable simulacrum <sup>(1)</sup> and the attempt to historicise the female voice.

The authors' response to the evisceration of subjective coherence and wholeness is conflated in the themes of the body, language and writing. The body, as the locus of social inscription, is defiled and mortified, as the individual somatic entity is aligned with the wound of the communal body. Inscribed on the body is a cutaneous lexicon, as the body, the semantic signifier of cultural imperialism, becomes a locutory occasion. Language too becomes a contestatory site; the inherent conduit of logocentric principles and as such a potential locus of dissidence and transgression; for instance, in the neologisms and linguistic inversions of *Lumpérica*, or the enunciation of taboos in *Más Allá de las*

*Máscaras*. It is perhaps the significance of the act of writing itself which emerges as the greatest point of consonance between the authors; it is only through reinscribing and thus reconditioning the social nomenclature that any sense of ontological and historical validity can be recovered.

It is perhaps only through this dialectic of reinscription, in the continual displacements of meaning, that any sense of authenticity is to be gained; for in order to overcome hegemonic (patriarchal) axioms (“Un padre no se rompe, ves?”<sup>[2]</sup>) and to effect a shift in normative, essentialist paradigms, the female subject must actuate this ricocheting of subjectivity and alterity. It is this process of displacement (the epitome of ‘écriture feminine’<sup>[3]</sup>), this transcending of restrictive binarisms, which characterises the writing of Chilean women under dictatorship; a writing striving towards the limen of subjectivity, a resemanticisation of ontology.

**NOTES: CONCLUSION**

1. The Chilean psychologist and writer Ana Vásquez has discussed this problem in the following terms: “Dicho en otros términos, nos hemos dado cuenta de que incluso el lenguaje – vehículo de las ideas – ha sido elaborado por otros, para expresar una visión de la realidad que no es la nuestra, sus estructuras no nos convienen y para la mayoría de nosotras son incluso incomprensibles” (*La Otra Mitad de Chile*, M. Angélica Meza, Instituto Para el Nuevo Chile, Santiago, 1986, p.105).
2. See *El Cuarto Mundo* by Diamela Eltit, Santiago, Biblioteca Breve de Seix Barral, 1996, p.49
3. The concept of ‘écriture feminine’ as posited by Hélène Cixous espouses the rejection of binary oppositions and embraces a fluid, protean conception of literature and the textual body.

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