

A Note on Contemporary Argentine Women's Writing: A Discussion of *The Web*

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Argentina is the most developed of the Spanish-American countries: statistics show Argentines to have the highest level of incomes, the best health care, and the most opportunities for education. Argentina has also had a strong tendency towards political democracy and equality in recent years. As a result, opportunities exist for some women to deal with the exploitation and suppression common to male-dominated societies which were inherited from the Spanish conquistadores. The very existence of a collection such as *The Web*¹ indicates that women have a voice in their society. Development has not taken place evenly however; in many cases, Argentine women continue to be victims--imprisoned physically, socially, and politically. The women writers represented in this collection belong to a group of socially and politically aware women who, although not themselves victims of the abuses of which they write, empathize with women who are, and are dedicated to speaking for them.

These women are all writing in the latter half of the twentieth century and are influenced by the literary movements of this time. According to Luis Leal in *Historia del Cuento Hispanoamericano*,² there are two movements in Argentina at this time, both strands of Postmodernism. The first defines the characteristics of "criollismo,"³ having its base in the rural Argentine landscape, often dealing with the lives of the peasants but adding elements of the fantastic and of Magical Realism. The second strand is more cosmopolitan, dealing with universal themes, often from the point of view of the individual, so that the world reflected is often irrational, ironic, and illogical. Both strands regard writing as non-representational, transcending a traditionally coherent reality. It is easy to see that women would be drawn to this technique of expressing their reality, especially if they saw that the traditional world as a male-dominated one did not give credibility to their own inner world. Argentine women writers use these new trends in literature to express their own situation creatively.

"The Clearing" by Luisa Levinson is about a prostitute as a female victim, both in an urban environment and in the jungle.⁴ She finds them both equally degrading and violent; she tolerates her tormentor as best she can but finally, in a burst of hatred, kills him, and escapes into the jungle, even while she realizes that she has already been destroyed by the masculine forces which dominate her world. Levinson discusses the imprisonment of the Argentine woman by adapting classical myths to the rural Argentine landscape.

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Ernest Lewald, ed. *The Web* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1983). All references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

2 Luis Leal, *Historia del Cuento Hispanoamericano* (Mexico: Ediciones de Andrea, 1971).

3 A literary movement peculiar to Spanish-America in the early 20th century, growing out of a wish to come to terms with themselves through identification with their landscape. Writers made a conscious effort to reject Modernism and instead develop themes and styles that were distinctly American.

4 *The Web* 9-24

The theme of imprisonment is carried by the image of the net or web which controls much of the narrative. The mythic dimension of the web to denote imprisonment harks back to the myth of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in which Clytemnestra traps Agamemnon in a cloak she has woven and then kills him to avenge his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia. She, in turn, is killed by her son, Orestes. The Furies, female presences, mourn her death and seek justice, but the gods, Apollo and Athena, intervene on behalf of the male line and Orestes is saved.

There are many parallels between this myth and this story, "The Clearing." The jungle itself is likened to a web or a net: "a primeval force that threatened to strangle the open space with its green noose" (11). The man and the net-hammock also form part of this prison. In an attempt to totally entrap her, he closes the net over her face and body, neatly tying the rope into a final double knot over her feet. The entrapment in the jungle clearing is only one dimension of her imprisonment; the other is her life as a prostitute. She cannot help but remember that this gaucho who has brought her to the clearing in the jungle also mastered her when she was in the brothel. Thus, the jungle imagery becomes merged with the lasso at her feet and with the mosquito net under which she slept in the brothel. The jungle vines in which she gets caught merge with the man's hands that abused her. Like Clytemnestra, this woman finds herself in a web of destructive male domination. Both women strike out and kill by seducing the male abuser into their net, entrapping him there, and then killing him. Both women are doomed to destruction however because of the male forces which control them. In "The Clearing," the male forces take the form of the jungle, and of the institution of prostitution--in both situations the gaucho is her master. After she kills him she tries to escape, but the physical landscape of the jungle, as well as the confusion in her mind, entrap and destroy her.

Another story which is set in the rural Argentine landscape is Beatrice Guido's "Takeover."⁵ It is the story of the trickery of six women in the takeover of an estate, Las Acacias, from the male heir, Don Marcelo. In the microcosm of the estate we can see the prejudices against women and against non-whites, the social and economic systems which imprison them in subservient roles. The women respond to this by mysteriously tricking Marcelo into impregnating them so that their offspring can inherit his property. Guido's technique is to situate her story in the world of the fantastic, showing how women have untraditional ways of dealing with the traditional, male-oriented laws that entrap them.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanandy explains that in the literature of the fantastic, "Two distinct levels of reality are presented. One is our everyday world, ruled by laws of reason and convention, and the other is the supernatural, or that which is inexplicable according to our logic Against the background of this logical world, the narrator introduces a level of reality which rational man cannot accept."⁶ Chanandy relates the fantastic to Magical Realism which also accepts the supernatural as part of everyday reality; both assume a view of reality that is untraditional.

In "Takeover" both men belong to the traditional, rational world. Don Marcelo assumes unmitigated control of the property; the women's father laments the fact that he has daughters instead of a male heir. The women have little status in this world; they never even speak. Theirs is the ambiguous world of the fantastic. The men are not even aware of this aspect of reality and so it can be used against them effectively. The seductions are carried out within the framework of the fantastic. Each woman seduces Marcelo as if she were an enchantress, identifiable only by her primal female smell and touch: "always

⁵ *The Web* 75-83

⁶ Amaryll Beatrice Chanandy, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

exuding a different fragrance, alternating between the oven-fresh bread, well water, wet grass and anisette biscuits" (80).

It becomes magically funny when, at the end of her story, the babies appear "bundled up like the babies of the remote and invented ancestors that stared at me from the pictures in the living room." Marcelo hears the triumphant laughter of the women as he sees his children "lying on the shelves and the tables, between the porcelain cats and the Sevres china." The women have succeeded in turning their imprisonment to their own advantage, imprisoning him in a world of bewilderment.

In contrast to "The Clearing" and "Takeover," Marta Lynch, in "Latin Lover,"⁷ and Silvina Bullrich's "The Lover"⁸ are set in urban environments, and both show how women are trapped in interior spaces. In contrast to external spaces where the natural landscape physically imprisons women, in the case of internal spaces, it is the social and emotive associations which imprison the women who are forced to inhabit them.

Amy Sue Katz Kaminsky talks about Lynch's use of interior space in her novels: "interior space is most associated with Lynch's women characters, who are stifled by it. Houses, patios, bedrooms, brothels, kitchens--all associated with traditional female roles--serve as agents of oppression in the novels."⁹ Kaminsky explains that Lynch uses interior spaces as symbols for feminine oppression because these spaces compel women to play the roles they wish to escape.

The interior space in "Latin Lover" is the "camp" apartment in which the woman is lodged by her lover. It is he who selects the location overlooking his own conjugal home, and the "camp" style (denoting the temporary, artificial nature of their relationship). She feels trapped here, her very existence is restricted, imprisoned in the role that he has set out for her: "My role had been defined very clearly and then tied in neatly with the apartment that was a short block away from his home: the bedroom, the bathroom and the kitchen now demanded more of me than any earlier memories tied both of us" (96). Like the women in "Las Acacias," as soon as she realizes that she is imprisoned, she is able to release herself from the emotional and psychological dependence on him, and is soon able to leave him.

"The Lover" shows the other side of the coin--the situation of the wife as lover. The wife, Monica, is neglected by her husband, unfulfilled and bored with the role of housewife assigned to her. Her status allows her a lover, as long as she does not get emotionally involved. Her lover, Rolo, understands the rules of the game better than she does so that as soon as she begins to get too attached to him, he leaves her. Emotionally and psychologically drained, she attempts suicide.

As in "Latin Lover," the females in the family are confined to the indoors--their bedrooms, kitchen, and living room. The daughters are seen sitting around eating candy; the mother is allowed to go to select cocktail parties with her women friends. They must wait for men to provide them with some measure of freedom. The irony of the story comes in the last paragraph when the daughter admits that "With Rolo, it was so different: we did not even notice what we ate." The three women are helpless without men. It is easy to see that "Rolo was our sun," that "Nica who was past seventeen . . . [was] eager to get married." The women cannot enjoy each other without a male presence. It seems only a

⁷ *The Web* 93-101

⁸ *The Web* 37-42

⁹ Amy Sue Katz Kaminsky, "Marta Lynch: The expanding political consciousness of an Argentine Woman Writer," diss. Penn State 1975, 188.

matter of time before the daughters are in as pitiable a state as the mother, emotionally and psychologically confined, unable to take control of their own lives.

Luisa Valenzuela's "Change of Guard"¹⁰ takes the form of an allegory which intertwines the world of the real and the unreal, the political and the personal, capturing the imprisonment of women at all levels. Politically, the woman, Laura, is a prisoner of the man and his friends; there is evidence that cruelty, maybe torture, was involved: "this back that seems to have suffered so much." He has confined her to a room and gradually works away at breaking her will--"una desaparecida"¹¹ in the making. He also imprisons her sexually, abusing her and tantalizing her in perverse ways so that she comes to believe that "The times when she makes love to him are the only moments that belong to her." On a larger scale, political imprisonment is being used to represent the repression and violence practised against Argentine women on a personal level. Laura must liberate herself by using the only weapon available to her--her own distraught mind.

In this story, the images of imprisonment work in opposite ways at the same time, for the objects which represent imprisonment for the woman are the same ones she uses to free herself. They are usually introduced in a blurred form as they come to the tortured mind of Laura, and they gradually assume a clearer focus as she realizes the full significance of her imprisonment and develops strategies for fighting it. Valenzuela seems to be suggesting that the institutions that imprison women must themselves be subverted and made to function as agents of liberation.

The first of these is the image of the keys, which she first notices when she is only vaguely aware of her imprisonment. Physically, she is locked in, but she believes that freedom is within her grasp and that it is her own weakness that prevents her from liberating herself. Her psychological imprisonment is so great that she does not even realize the man's complete power over her. As her mind begins to clear up she realizes that the keys are there as a trap. She comes to know that she must not touch them for she must not reveal her growing awareness. Ironically, the object that signified freedom to her is in fact the symbol of her imprisonment; but the double irony is that her realization of this is a sign that her mind is clearing. She knows that "the poor keys are not to blame for setting up an ambush for her." Having gained this knowledge, she identifies her enemy and prepares herself for battle with him.

Similarly the image of the window is presented through the confused mind of the narrator. Laura is first seen "sitting at the window, looking at a sterile white wall asking herself what lies behind the wall and thinking only of him." Then she suddenly makes important associations. She likens the missing picklock of the window to the one in his pocket: "a weapon to be put in the fist and slammed into the jaw." This prefigures other weapons that he has in his control. There is the weapon "in his pocket"--his sexual organ which he uses to dominate her sexually; the whip which makes her "scream desperately," and his own gun which she eventually uses to kill him. As the images begin to assume coherence, her memory gradually returns, giving her the strength to break out of her imprisonment.

The image of mirrors is also used to express Laura's imprisonment and her struggle for liberation. The man installs multiple mirrors in an effort to confuse and further imprison her: "It is a matter of an unexplained multiplication, a multiplication of herself in the mirrors and a multiplication of the mirrors--which is most disconcerting" (135). He wants her to remain unsure of her own reality. This is the cruellest trick played on her but she subverts it by using the reflection of herself to make contact with her own con-

¹⁰ *The Web* 129-52.

¹¹ "one who has disappeared." This name was given to people who disappeared during military rule in Argentina. Politically based torture and executions were suspected.

sciousness. He wants her trapped there, fragmented into multiple representations, unable to capture her real self, but she turns the trick against him, using the unreal to locate the real. Laura finds strength to shout "no" at him and in so doing smashes the mirror of his own reflection into bits. This is success for her, especially since he, himself, does not realize that she is pitting her mental resources against him. He remains ignorant of her growing awareness, confident that he has imprisoned her in his mirror. He hands her the gun with which she is to shoot herself but, by then, she recognizes him as her gaoler and destroys him.

These five stories are a sampling of what *The Web* has to offer. A variety of techniques are used to present themes of male domination and violence. Some of the writers make use of the "criollismo" movement by subverting it to their own needs; instead of celebrating the rural landscape and its indigenous people, they show women at the mercy of the gauchos and proprietors who seem to "own" the countryside. Experimentalism is also used in the stories that deal with the urban culture, for, as women strive to liberate themselves economically and politically, techniques evolve to present the ever-changing male-female relationships.