

1-1-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Chown, Linda (1994) "Ethical Complexity in Latin-American Women Novelists," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol10/iss2/12>

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# ETHICAL COMPLEXITY IN LATIN-AMERICAN WOMEN NOVELISTS

*Linda Chown*

While I was pondering the connections between ethics and writings by Latin-American women authors, I saw a recent commentary by David Hoekema on "Schindler's List" in *The Grand Rapids Press*. His conclusion illustrates what I mean by ethical complexity: "When we think abstractly, we may succumb to the illusion that the moral world is simple" (G1). He finds that contradictions between Schindler's sometimes questionable personal character and his stellar public activity are fruitful precisely *because* the film does *not* aim to pronounce a preformulated ethic, a series of "ready made moral judgements," but is rather "a film for the conscience to chew on" (G1). In short, this film constitutes and presents ethical complexity, not clear-cut ethical oversimplifications.

In cultural milieus which often reduce such complexity into hierarchies of higher, white or male, as opposed to lower, female or Indian, Latin American women novelists do something unique. They implode such hierarchies. *Webster's Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, defines "implode" as "to collapse inward . . . or to become greatly reduced as if from collapsing." In these writings, static hierarchical assumptions collapse, falling in upon themselves. The fiction explores and introduces a world beyond rigid, preimposed distinctions of higher and lower. The key words here are "rigid" and, more importantly, "preimposed." A statement about Latin American women writers by Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos addresses their unique manner of imploding preimposed patterns of understanding:

Latin American women novelists seem to have discovered long before Robbe-Grillet and the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman* that the universe is surface. And if it is surface, let us polish it . . . So that it shines, so that it sparkles, so that it makes us forget . . . that mania for seeking out that which is . . . behind the curtain (qtd. in Castillo 140-141).

In the twentieth century, both in Spain and in Latin America, women writers often living in ethically or politically repressive times have explored the nature of fixed, ethically one-dimensional systems. Whereas in Spain a renaissance of women writers developed, particularly in the 1950's, Latin-American women writers have regularly created alternatives to rigid hierarchical structures. Their writing implodes and complicates oversimplified views of complex ethical situations in three ways. First, *repetitions* highlight contradictions and paradoxes; second, experiments similar to *magical realism* compel readers to re-examine ethical norms. And third, intensification of *solitude* develops independent and complex reconsiderations of a culture's ethical structures. I explore these three areas, with examples from four

writers: Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos, who was director of cultural programs in Chiapas, Mexican ambassador to Israel, and author of novels, poems, essays, and short stories; Brazilian Clarice Lispector, author famous for plotless narratives and daring linguistic experimentation; Chilean writer Maria Luisa Bombal, author of the resonant novels, *House of Mist* and *The Shrouded Woman*, whom Pablo Neruda once called "The Firebee" because of her inspiring energies; and Mexican novelist and journalist Elena Poniatowski, who strives to interrogate existing structures and present what had formerly been suppressed or hidden.

It has been argued that certain women writers "take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it . . . writing . . . the very possibility of change . . . the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures." It is important to observe that in Latin American women's writing, there is often little separation between the workings of language and social conditions. Discovering a change in language is often equal to implementing a change in the ethical order itself. For instance, Rosario Castellanos would search for "another language . . . another starting point . . . another way to be" (qtd. in Ahearn xiii).

A first route to ethical complexity appears in repetitions which highlight contradictions and paradoxes in understanding. Maria Luisa Bombal's fiction "highlights[s] the ruptures in a world filled with repetitious rituals." For instance, a character will ask, "Why did we get married?" and receive the banal response, "Just to get married" (Bassnett 28). Elena Poniatowska's short novel *Querido Diego* foregrounds ways in which a woman artist may, because of a romantic obsession, lose her powers of perception. The weight and repetitiveness of the heroine's emotion allows the reader to perceive immediately her complete stagnation, experience her encompassing loss: "Not only have I lost my son, I have lost my creative possibilities as well; I no longer know how to paint. I no longer want to paint" (39).

While Castellanos' and Bombal's fiction focuses upon people's daily lives, Lispector's novels explore people's understanding. Repetitions are a hallmark of her unique fiction; for instance, each chapter begins with the last sentence of the previous chapter. One chapter closes with, "But there is something that must be said; that must be said" (108). The following chapter begins, "But there is something that must be said; that must be said." Lispector's truncated, hypnotic style facilitates investigation of the most cruel, and rigid kinds of inequalities. *The Passion According to G.H* critically and repeatedly examines Western metaphysics, its concepts of individuality, understanding, humanism, neutrality and impersonality. The book insistently focuses on these to show G.H. able to implode certain givens in herself and to grow beyond them. She grapples with inherited definitions of individuality as she has learned them, only to find that "The gradual deheroization of oneself is the true labor . . ." (168). In further painful redefinition, G.H. accepts, "To be is to be beyond the human" (166). G.H.'s conflicted connections to neutrality and understanding invade her text. Early, she has to change "in order to go into that monstrous thing that is my living neutrality" and to reach "the tender neutrality of myself" (90, 107). Such repetitions—about identity, individuality, humanization,

etc.—help the reader examine the novel's radical reversals as positive reconstruction, not radical breakdown. Perhaps the acme of G.H.'s achievement occurs in her concluding recognition: "I finally extended beyond my own sensibility and the world interdependent with me . . ." (175). For both G.H. and the reader, such learning depends upon intricate repetition, replay, intensity of response and bare, taut, invocatory written language. Those writing about Lispector say that she "interrogates not only" the "binarism and other binarisms constitutive of the Western concept of self—male/female, mind/body—but she also asks the far more difficult question of why such distinctions exercise our minds and why we assume they are necessarily meaningful . . . . In short, Castellanos is engaged in rethinking the rules for all sorts of human exchanges . . . at their most basic levels" (Castillo 140-141). Repeating intensely difficult, abstract questions allows for complex implosion and rewriting of distinctions metaphysical, psychological, and ethical.

A second route to implode and fertiley complicate unexamined ethical formulations occurs in writing analogous to magical realism. Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* begins complexly: "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love (3)." The usual definitions of magical realism point to its counterpointing of the real and the unreal. Latin American women's writing frequently mingles the visible and tangible with the invisible and non-tangible. Writing in the 1920's, Victoria Ocampo rejects the notion of art for art's sake, saying, "I don't know what 'art for art's sake' is. I do know what life for life's sake is . . . I don't know how to write novels or stories because I never 'invent.' Everything I live is an 'invention' from which I've never been able to escape " (qtd. in Meyer 45). Latin-American women's fiction presents life lived on the cusp, as it were, between and including *both* reality *and* what we think of as fiction. Ocampo observes,

we live our lives on the edges of miracles, denying their existence on account of their very routineness. Water is turned into wine every day before our eyes and we keep on needing to be told what happened once at the wedding in Cana in order to discover something unusual and unprecedented in it. In a word, we need a saint to point out a miracle before we notice that it exists, as we need a poet . . . to add the mystery of the stars to the flavor of the fruit. (qtd. in Meyer 192)

Frequently, Latin-American women writers dwell in and encourage such alchemy to dissipate divisions which might preclude entrance into a world of transmutations. They do so by perceptual distortions—such as a focus on surfaces, a breakdown of divisions between the important and "insignificant," silence and speech, and other reconfigurations of the expected. In short, in their writing, they re-valorize, re-evaluate what has been placed into pre-determined categories.

For instance, Castellanos suggests a different kind of reading in which deeper orders and in-depth reading are not central. Latin-American writers focus on what might be called superficial. The reader is inundated in things without their customary depth and meaning. In the process, readers may discover an unexpected

fictiveness because of the many inversions, surprises, cultural shocks and countershocks. In Lispector's *The Passion*, for instance, G.H. does her growing by means of interaction with a very much shunned creature, the cockroach.

A magnificent example of magical realism in women's writing occurs in *The Passion*, where G.H. discovers a drawing on the wall which was not decoration but writing. It was a hidden mural of charcoal outlines, drawn with thick lines and doubled in places. At first she discerns these as mummies, until little by little she recognizes that the figure on the wall is "an angular zombie figure [which] reminded her of someone: myself" (33). In this room full of potentials for self-knowledge, she discovers there are no insides: "It is a cubicle with nothing but surfaces" (35).

Both in sequence, imagery, and plot development, Latin American women's fiction frequently calls attention to imbalances in the way the world has come to be perceived and ethically oversimplified. It has been said of Lispector that she "unexpresses the inexpressible" (Castillo 186), that her sentences become antisentences. There is indeed a deliberate dishevelment which corresponds to a lack of consensual order in ethical relations in the world at large. Latin American women writers' dishevelments of the physical and invisible givens serve to compel readers to re-understand the nature of their own involvements in everything.

The third way of emphasizing, imploding and repositioning often polarized ethical frameworks involves a fertilizing solitude, a dwelling within oneself—even in populated conditions—a solitude which is not an abandonment of other people. Like the other two methods of accentuating, emphasizing, even at times exaggerating a given condition to change and know it better, many Latin-American women writers enlarge their characters' solitude so as to intensify their independent introspective powers. Victoria Ocampo, says, "I believe that born writers, whatever their sex or means of expression, write above all for themselves, to free themselves from themselves, to arrive at a clarification of themselves, to communicate with themselves. The only one who can communicate with others is one who has communicated first with himself" (qtd. in Meyer, 172). The novelists, in different ways, enlarge a character's solitary perception of her own perceptions. GH finds that if she has "the courage to leave her feeling behind, . . . [she] discovers that huge life of an extremely busy silence, experiences in other words "a life of singeing nowness" (93).

The novels generate that "singeing nowness" by stripping away counterproductive, inherited judgments which are not part of independent understandings. Accordingly, solitary woman and men are caught up in the need to "'invent themselves' through continual re-elaboration, reworking the quilts of custom" (Castillo 32). Most critics of Latin-American writers stress the heterogeneity of the culture and the importance of the social fabric in which people live. This is not a cultural context in which, as with Twain's Huck Finn, characters can believe in the ultimate getaway, that fabled "lighting out for the territory." The emphasis in the fiction on the positive condition of solitude is both powerful and pervasive. One of the most famous statements about the value of solitude comes from Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien Años de Soledad*, "El secreto de una buena vejez no es otra cosa

que un pacto honrado con la soledad" (174). Such intense solitude may indeed be linked to a sense of the collective "aliveness" in Hispanic cultures. Intense solitude richly serves to encourage the development of thoughtful ethical complexity.

Through repetitions which concretize the unspoken; by variants of magical realism in superimpositions, palimpsestic models or nebulous fogs; and by a well nurtured solitude, the writers evince commitment to both the personal and the political. That is to say, these writers are developing means of writing their way into a new ethical sense, one not polarized into power or racial stereotypes, but one frequently guided by a refreshing sense of connection to others, to the world at large and to themselves.

Luisa Valenzuela points to the potentials of this positive ethical refashioning in saying "What we women will do, and are now doing, is to effect a radical change in the electrical charge of words" (qtd. in Castillo, 64). Here, again, David Hoekema's response to *Schindler's List* is relevant to Latin American women writers, whose ways of writing about the moral world are infinitely complex, not simple. They reflect a new way of thinking about ethics, as it appears, among many other places, in *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* by Mark Johnson, whose book "offers a new account of moral reasoning that avoids the pitfalls of absolutism and relativism by grounding morality in the evolving wisdom of our collective experience" (University). Latin American women's writing overall implodes rather than explodes those ethical distinctions which limit the development of humane justice; their writing explores the dimensions of what a reformulated and humane justice might be for the collective and in the individual.

In another article on "Schindler's List," Thomas Keneally, author of the book published in Great Britain as *Schindler's Ark*, is cited as saying that he looks for "the person who can write about ordinary events but in a way that gives them the reek of the unexpected, the totally individual" (Ponce). It is important to stress that, in the absence of indications to the contrary as are evident in thesis fiction, many Latin American women's writings can meaningfully be understood as writing not to present and/or pronounce explicit values, but rather to examine complexly the process of valuing itself. Like the film, Latin American women writers uncover ethical complexity and thus provide much "for the conscience to chew on."

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