

THE

DIAMELA ELTIT



FOURTH

WORLD

EL CUARTO MUNDO
TRANSLATED AND
FOREWORD
BY MARK GERDES

The Fourth World

El cuarto mundo

DIAMELA ELTIT

Translated & with a Foreword

BY DICK GERDES

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THE FOURTH WORLD

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Translator's Foreword

CHILE has witnessed a spectacular transition from the Latin American country best known for fostering poets such as Nobel Prize for Literature recipients Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda to producing fiction writers who have acquired a notable presence not only in Chile but also in the international arena. The writings of José Donoso (b. 1924), Antonio Skarmeta (b. 1940), Ariel Dorfman (b. 1942), Isabel Allende (b. 1942), and Diamela Eltit (b. 1949) have been translated and read with enthusiasm in several languages, including French, German, Italian, and English. Diamela Eltit is the newcomer to this family of seasoned writers, and she is one of the most intellectual, creative, innovative, challenging, and unsettling of this group.

One key to appreciating the strange worlds of Eltit's writings is to realize that while those other writers fled into exile after a 1973 military takeover of Salvador Allende's Marxist government in Chile (Allende was killed in the coup), Diamela Eltit, then twenty-four years old, found no alternative but to join resistance groups and actively protest the newly installed military dictatorship that lasted until 1989 when General César Augusto Pinochet once again allowed democratic elections. Eltit experienced firsthand the devastating effects of dictatorship and what it meant to be a Latin American woman living in exile within her own country during the 1970s.

The mastery of Eltit's fiction is explicit in the way she handles language. In her novels, narrative discourse is not shaped by conventional storytelling techniques or standard characterizations, but rather by the utilization of language and syntax to reflect the fragmented and distorted society in which she lived. Hence, Eltit's fiction (fragmentation, violence, and exploitation) is a faithful representation of her life (dictatorship, oppression, and exploitation). It represents symbolically and physically the sociopolitical situation during almost two decades of cruelty in Chile as well as several centuries of foreign domination and exploitation in Latin America. Her writing must be read as a type of literary politics in which linguistic and literary devices require the reader to rethink the novel genre and reconsider its relationship to society.

Diamela Eltit is a professor of literature, film director, cultural activist, and feminist. She presently resides in Chile. Her books question society's dominant structures of power; they look beyond conventional political tools of social analysis and seek to transgress outmoded world order by dismantling, in clinical fashion, language that drives wedges between the sexes. In addition, she attempts to vindicate social marginality produced by the oppression of women, ethnic groups, and the dispossessed in today's society. The titles of her works provide an initial clue to what her narrative worlds signify: *Lumpérica* (1982), *Por la patria* (1986; For the nation), *El cuarto mundo* (1988; *The Fourth World*), *Vaca sagrada* (1991; Sacred cow), and *El padre mío* (1989; My father). *El padre mío* is a testimony based on taped discussions that Eltit conducted with an individual who was once influential but after being subjected to political persecution went insane and became a street person. This text is read less for its literary value than for its psychologically charged presentation of corruption in the Chilean political underworld through the eyes of a mentally

deranged person beset by delusions, paranoia, and fear. The title 'My Father' ironically alludes to cultural values based on the concepts of patriarchy, religion, and power that continually lead to corruption, pain, and destruction. Similarly, the title of Eltit's latest novel, 'Sacred Cow,' incorporates cultural symbols that run the gamut from sexual attributes (large-breasted women) to entities often unreasonably immune from criticism or opposition – dictators and politics. Ambiguity is transformed into rebellion when concepts of patriarchy, machismo, exploitation, and power become the suggestive link.

The title of Eltit's first novel, *Lumpérica*, is most likely a combination of 'lumpen' (literally, the dispossessed and uprooted individuals cut off from the economic and social class with which they might normally be identified) and 'America' (meaning, here, the ostracized, illegitimate, inferior world that Latin America – the female – represents from a Spanish, Euro-centered, male perspective). In this case, the combination of these into *Lumpérica* allows for the signified (a vast community of poor undesirables) to be vindicated and to acquire a united voice. (In the United States, a similar process occurred when Hispanic Americans politically empowered themselves by assuming the label 'Chicano,' a term that is used in Mexico with derision against the 'traitors' who went North, similar to the term 'sudaca' in Eltit's novel, used by Spaniards to denigrate Latin Americans.) Finally, *The Fourth World* offers a similar interpretation, even though the narrative process differs somewhat from the other novels. 'The Fourth World' is a recently coined phrase referring to the marginalization of inferiors who are beginning to appear en masse throughout the developed (First) World.

Diamela Eltit has conceived a highly intellectual but carved-in-the-flesh strategy, fusing the political problems of the real

world with the aesthetics of literature that wounds, literature with meaning, literature that creates vantage points for understanding society and its problems. Eltit's phantasmagoric worlds provide a cultural analysis neither Formalist nor Marxist, but one that focuses on a systematic and dynamic social language, and one that possesses its own body politic and provides links to diverse human relationships in modern society.

The Fourth World has been conceived and brought to life through a series of opposing views that, on one level, demonstrate the violence and exploitation in society, especially when myths, ritual, and habit are at the heart of humankind's problems. On another level, however, in almost post-Hegelian fashion, gender-based opposites (male/female respectively) such as mind/body, exterior/interior, open, public spaces/closed, private spaces, violence/peace, torture/pleasure, guilt/innocence apparently collide but never really cancel each other out or meld to create a new identity but somehow exist in relation to and for the mere sake of their opposite. The text is divided into two parts: the first, narrated by the male offspring of a set of twins, takes the reader from conception to his teen years and focuses on the mother's pain, delusions, vices, and fears. The second part, narrated by the female twin counterpart, is a vastly different text describing the impending birth of a deformed baby girl (emblematic of the novel itself and all Latin American fiction) conceived incestuously by the twins who, in turn, are abandoned by their parents. Language use in both parts is revealing. The male's discourse can be seen as indirect, winding, nonconfrontational, thoughtful, connoting superiority (as it is with physical space inside the womb: he is on top of her). The female voice tends to be more direct but private, showing emotion, anger, excitement, and passion as she interacts with others (parents, brother, and sister).

The ramifications are varied, but in every situation of the novel the reader is provided new perspectives on old problems: in terms of gender, androgyny; in terms of the politics of oppression, vindication; and in terms of language, symbolism. And there you have it: a tale of sex, politics, and writing; yet sex is perverse (but inescapable), politics are exploitative (and menacing), and writing is an incestuous (but, in the end, vindicating) process.

The nuclear element that provides Eltit the opportunity to fuse sex, politics, and writing is found in the most basic driving force that she knows and viscerally understands: the female body. But it is the female body that is wounded and pained not only by menstruation, coitus, incest, rape, childbirth, sickness, and old age, but also by the hidden violence existing in every couple. It is the female body of political marginality (hence, the term 'sudaca' in the novel) writing from a position of inferiority, deformity, ambiguity, irony, and anarchy, all of which place Eltit squarely within a challenging, revolutionary perspective. And while the future looks ominous, the novel also speaks for battered, sick bodies which are, once and for all, redeemed. There is no doubt that Diamela Eltit is aware that her narratives unmask cultural biases and assume the power inherent in literary works and critical practices.

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1. DEFEAT WILL BE IRREVOCABLE

ON APRIL 7 my mother woke up with a fever. Sweating and fatigued, she moved between the sheets closer to my father ever so painfully, hoping he would come to her aid. Inexplicably and without compunction, my father possessed her, forcing her to submit to his desires. He was awkward and slow, at moments about to give up, but then he would begin anew, driven by lust.

My mother was conspicuously faint from her fever. Her body was exhausted and irritatingly apathetic. Nothing was said. As my father dominated her with his movements, her only reaction was to comply, automatically and clumsily.

Afterward, when it was over, my mother stretched out between the sheets, falling asleep instantly. Then she had a dream infested with feminine horror.

On that April 7, enshrouded in my mother's fever, I not only was conceived, but also must have shared her dream because I suffered the horrible feminine attack of dread.

THE NEXT DAY, April 8, my mother's condition had deteriorated noticeably. Her sunken eyes and incoherent words meant the fever was rising. Her joints ached, making it severely difficult for her to move. Although she was consumed by thirst, she could not swallow anything. Like her cotton shirt soaking from sweat, her hair was wet and stuck to the sides

of her face, causing a rash. While her half-shut eyes filtered out the light entering the room, her feverish body trembled spasmodically.

Gloomily, my father just stood by and watched her. No doubt because he was terrified, in the morning he possessed her again – hurriedly, ineptly, demanding little. Seemingly unaware of anything around her, she only complained of an intense numbing pain in her legs that my father, by rubbing them, tried to alleviate.

Like the day before, she fell asleep quickly and began to dream again, but this time her dream was fraught with strange, obscure images, like an erupting volcano with gushing lava.

My mother's dream reached me in flashes: even though the gush of red lava frightened me, I rejoiced, for I felt as if I were witnessing a divine ritual.

Before long, I understood the two opposing sensations; after all, it was simple and predictable: on that April, my father engendered my twin sister.

I REACTED to perturbing and chaotic emotions that day. The intrusion into my space became unbearable, but it was irrevocable.

My world was relatively calm at first, despite vague sensations of malaise that I could never completely repress. We were but larvae swept along by the waters, our two cords helping us to live in quasi-independent spaces.

But that illusion was always short-lived because of the frequency of my mother's dreams, which were patterned after two merging symmetrical figures – two spires, two panthers, two old people, two roads.

Those dreams would make me nervous, but the tension would eventually dissipate. My trepidation would be trans-

formed into an infernal hunger, forcing me to satiate myself by opening corporeal floodgates that were not yet ready to perform such tasks.

Afterward, I would be overcome by lethargy, sometimes confused with a state of serenity. Still fraught with indecision, however, I would let my senses flow outward.

WITH HER health restored, my mother not only returned to her normal routine, but demonstrated a surprising propensity for the ordinary: there was more laughter than tears, more activity than rest, more doing than thinking.

To tell the truth, my mother had few ideas and her lack of originality irritated me the most. She would simply follow my father's ideas and, fearing that she might annoy him, would never question him.

Curiously, she showed considerable interest in her body; she was constantly wanting to go out and buy dresses, exclusive perfumes, even garish adornments. When she walked, my mother's ample yet supple body would sway rhythmically, giving the impression of robust good health. Perhaps it was the unusualness of her infirmity that made my father's loins burn when he saw her for the first time, helpless and diminished; not as a corporal other, but more like a mass of captive, submissive flesh.

WITHOUT ANY particular reason, I think that routine might have allowed me to separate myself from my twin sister, who was always lingering nearby. Even without wanting to be near her, I was still unable to avoid her movements and intentions. Early on, I was able to detect her true nature and, more important, her feelings toward me.

While I struggled with my apprehensions, she had to cope with her obsessions. As she began to grow, she would unleash innumerable, mysterious pulsations.

Her obsessions began the very moment she was conceived, the moment she began to anguish over the real dimension and precise significance of my presence. Immediately, she began seeking me out, but I evaded her, of course, keeping as much distance between us as possible.

During that first period, life was rudimentary: I would always be attuned to the movement of the waters, and when they became agitated I would chart a course taking me in the opposite direction.

My sister was weaker than me, which, of course, was due to the chronology of our conception; nevertheless, the differences between us were still greatly disproportionate. It seemed as though my mother's debility and my father's lack of vigor during sex had caused her weakness.

In my case, I benefited from my sister's fragility, for movements fatigued her and greatly reduced her radius of action.

Shortly thereafter, she began to trap me with her little tricks: every time I moved, the currents of the jostling waters would push her forward and, on two occasions, she crashed into me. I remember these moments as offensive, even threatening.

I had to confront her obsessions directly – the same ones I had been ignoring until that time – and while they would last barely an instant, there was something remarkably intimate about them. Nevertheless, after those two encounters I began to understand my strange sensation of her complicity with my mother.

I EXERCISED my utmost capacity to think. Before, I struggled with impressions that I would transform into truths, realizing later that none of it was very surprising.

The knowledge that my mother was my sister's accomplice enervated me, yet it was imperative to disentangle the form and meaning of such an alliance.