



The Woman in Latin American and Spanish Literature

*Essays on
Iconic
Characters*

Edited by
Eva Paulino Bueno *and*
María Claudia André

Foreword by
Marjorie Agosín

The Woman in Latin American and Spanish Literature

Essays on Iconic Characters

Edited by

EVA PAULINO BUENO *and*
MARÍA CLAUDIA ANDRÉ

FOREWORD BY MARJORIE AGOSÍN



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

The woman in Latin American and Spanish literature : essays on
iconic characters / edited by Eva Paulino Bueno and María Claudia
André ; foreword by Marjorie Agosín.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-6599-6

softcover : acid free paper (∞)

1. Latin American literature—History and criticism.
2. Women in literature. 3. Gender identity in literature.
4. Women and literature—Latin America. 5. Spanish
literature—History and criticism. I. Bueno, Eva Paulino.
II. André, María Claudia.

PQ7081.43.W66 2012

860.9'98—dc23

2012007553

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

© 2012 Eva Paulino Bueno and María Claudia André. All rights reserved

*No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying
or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.*

Front cover image © 2012 Shutterstock

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com

*The Woman in
Latin American and
Spanish Literature*

Dedicamos este livro às mulheres
da América Latina e da Espanha,
todas personagens fundamentais da história e
da cultura de seus respectivos países.



Dedicamos este libro a las mujeres de América Latina y
de España quienes inspiraron a todos
los personajes femeninos fundamentales
de la historia y de la cultura de sus respectivos países.

Acknowledgments

If it is true that it takes a village to raise a child, it is no less true that it takes a small battalion of brave souls to write a book, especially in our times of tweets and half baked sentences. We owe a lot to many people who have helped us along the way, in different forms. First, we want to acknowledge the contributors to this book for their patience, good humor, and comradeship during the revision process. It has been a pleasure to work with each of you, and to learn about your expertise.

At St. Mary's University, Eva Paulino Bueno wants to thank Dean Janet Dizinno, who approved a timely sabbatical. In the Department of Languages, she wants to thank two people: her colleague Mark Lokensgard, who graciously took over the duty of chairing the department for the period of the sabbatical, and the always kind and competent Rosalinda Helbig, administrative assistant, for her dedication, friendship, and impeccable organization of everything. She also thanks her co-editor María Claudia André, who once again proved to be the best co-editor and colleague anyone can wish for. At home, Eva wants to thank her husband Terry Caesar, always an inspiration in scholarly and other ways. Finally, she wants to thank two creatures who cannot read this book, her dogs Nora Inu and Buddy-san, who provided countless walks and hours of joy, as well as the opportunity to talk silly without concern for propriety. María Claudia André extends her gratitude to her husband Scott and her son Axel, her constant sources of love, understanding, and support. She also thanks Eva P. Bueno for being the driving force of this project.

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
<i>Foreword by Marjorie Agosín</i>	1
<i>Introduction</i>	3

I. WOMAN AS NATURE

1. Gender and Nation from Past to Present: From María to Macabéa HÉCTOR FERNÁNDEZ-L'HOESTE	14
2. Intoxicating Outlaws: Dominance and Sexuality in Rómulo Gallegos' <i>Doña Bárbara</i> PATRICIA L. SWIER	30
3. Through the Eyes of the Child: The Narrator of <i>Balún Canán</i> JEANIE MURPHY	46

II. WOMAN IN HISTORY

4. María Eugenia Alonso: The Modern Iphigenia Sacrificed to Society ROSEANNA MUELLER	60
5. Jesusa in the Context of Testimonios: Witness to an Age or Witness to Herself? LINDA LEDFORD-MILLER	74
6. <i>La cómplice oficial</i> : Catalina in Angeles Mastretta's <i>Arráncame la vida</i> ALICE EDWARDS	86
7. Cultural and Literary Ethos as Represented in García Lorca's <i>La casa de Bernarda Alba</i> JEFFREY OXFORD	101

III. WOMAN AS THE PERVERSE POWERS OF RACE AND SEX

8. Blackness, Otherness, Woman(ness): Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles or the Death Throes of Colonial Cartagena
LEONORA SIMONOVIS 116
9. Gabriela, or Freedom Versus Marriage
LINDA LEDFORD-MILLER 129

IV. WOMAN AND THE BURDEN OF GLOBALIZATION

10. Sex and the Two Cartagenas in Óscar Collazos' *Rencor*
ALDONA POBUTSKY 146
11. Reality by the Garbage Truckload: The Case of Unica Oconitrillo
JERRY HOEG 162

V. WOMAN AS THE UNKNOWABLE OTHER

12. Women in Borges: Teodelina Villar in "El Zahir"
MARÍA FERNÁNDEZ-LAMARQUE 178
13. Life Amidst the Ashes: Irene's Search for Meaning and Connection in María Flora Yáñez's *Las cenizas*
LISA MERSCHER 194
14. Can the Feminine Speak? Narrating Madalena and Macabéa
MARCUS V.C. BRASILEIRO 207

About the Contributors 223

Index 227

Foreword

MARJORIE AGOSÍN

Any student of contemporary Latin American literature will be delighted to discover this collection of essays carefully edited by Eva Paulino Bueno and María Claudia André. Both the editors and the participants have succeeded in combining critical thought and originality. This important body of work explores the literary history of Latin America through the representation of iconic female characters; it is intended to help the reader understand how the female characters have changed and developed in their search for new identities and new ways of being and acting in accordance to the society and the customs of their times. Each essay is carefully crafted and supported by the most recent theories in literary criticism, gender, and Latin American studies.

The unifying thread of this collection consists in its innovative reading of some canonical texts and its deep appreciation and understanding of the role of women as symbols of struggle, perseverance, and creativity. Here, together for the first time, these women characters enable us to understand how Latin American women are portrayed by both male and female writers, and thus help us re-think and re-interpret the dynamics between genders across boundaries, and across the different historical periods. This collection of essays reveals a complex, vast literary corpus and demonstrates through a variety of interpretive techniques that iconic feminine characters not only identify with the cultural and national history of the countries to which they belong, but also provide a counter-discourse or a nonofficial version of their historical accounts. The essays also show us that the feminine character is never static, but changes according to the surrounding social and historical pressures in the lives of their authors.

Each of the essays presents an iconic woman as a central character, one

that discloses the complexity of the themes surrounding the historical and political period in which she lived, from the cultural complexities and the stereotypes throughout the years, to the complexities of the postmodern world. Making connections between and among the essays, readers may perceive, for instance, that the plight of the black woman in an earlier period reappears in the twentieth century, and that the passivity that a character uses as a way to survive the rigors of a patriarchal society becomes the conduit to a rich interior life for another. Through these essays we distinguish the inner conflicts and passions of the female character, the development of her personality, and the constant dichotomy between the public and the domestic spaces, with the prevalence of the interior world as a shelter as well as a source of creativity and strength.

I celebrate this collection of essays; each illuminates different elements that are unique to the understanding of the feminine character in Latin American literature. Even though these characters were created in different chronological times, by writers from different backgrounds, and written in different languages, the critical reading and interpretation presented in this book enable us to understand the complex ways in which women characters explore their sense of belonging in the times and countries in which they live, using their own personal strength and wit, as women. The careful study of their physical, psychological, and emotional conflicts gives us, collectively, admiration and a sense of respect for the situation of women in Latin America, the source of inspiration for many of the characters in these novels.

To write the foreword for this book is a privilege and a great literary adventure because, finally, what makes these essays so fascinating is the fact that they do not simply present answers, but, rather, they inspire new questions and perspectives about the literature of Latin America.

Marjorie Agosin (Ph.D. Indiana) is a professor of Spanish at Wellesley College and has published books and essays on the plight of women in Third World countries.

Introduction

EVA PAULINO BUENO *and* MARÍA CLAUDIA ANDRÉ

This book is the result of decades of research and countless hours of dialogue among the contributors, as well as between the contributors and their students in different institutions. The impetus to transform our research into a book grew out of the editors' previous collaborative work leading to the publication of an encyclopedia of Latin American women writers in 2008. The work required for the encyclopedia enabled us to form a strong relationship with colleagues from different universities and to continue the discussion of aspects of the representation of women in Latin American literature and in Spanish literature written by both male and female writers. However, this collection of essays does not intend to be comprehensive; in fact, our first realization in the process of making this book is that it is hopelessly incomplete, as any project of this magnitude would be.

Hence, we must establish from the outset that the intention behind the selection of the essays included in this book is not encyclopedic; rather, the essays aim to foster discussion of *some* of the important issues that have been part of the representation of women in different times, and in different national literatures, without necessarily implying that these are the *only* novels treating the subjects, or that there are no other subjects that could perhaps also be included in the discussion. Each reader of Latin American and Spanish literature, as well as any colleague who teaches these literatures, may have other novels and short stories which constitute striking examples of how female protagonists have been used to represent different issues in different times. Our hope is that the reading of this book excites our readers to continue thinking about the subject and finding new connections and new inspirations in Latin American and Spanish literature.

We must also acknowledge the groundbreaking work of critics such as Roberto Schwarz, Doris Sommer, Octavio Paz, John Beverley, Jean Franco, Beatriz Sarlo, and Nadia Battella Gotlib, among others, who have made important contributions to a better and deeper understanding of other aspects of Latin American and Spanish literature, and whose discussions have been part of our teaching and writing careers. Given the great number of possible theoretical tools to be used in the essays, we must clarify that the contributors to this volume were left free to utilize a variety of theoretical orientations in their discussions. What interests us is to inquire how women characters have become the vehicle both of the interrogation of the “feminine” — and, by extension, of the “masculine” as well — and how the representation of women can be seen as a way to understand how relations of power have been present in the formation of the woman subject in the literatures of Latin America and Spain.

Our intention is not to make a chronological study of canonical texts. We do, however, recognize that for most of Latin America, literature came to its first meaningful expressivity during the crucial time of national formation and ideological consolidation, and that is why our first section deals with some early ways in which women characters were portrayed in Latin American literature, as representatives of nature. Without necessarily agreeing with Fredric Jameson’s statement that “all” Third World literature — and Latin American literature included — “necessarily project[s] a political dimension in the form of a national allegory” (65), we concede that the writers of the young Latin American nations needed literature to accomplish many things, among them to praise the nature of the country, to instill in readers a sense of civic purpose, and to impart a certainty of the correctness, necessity, and urgency of the national enterprise.¹

In other words, at that moment, in the presence of the enormous physical realities of the vast, unknown territories, the ruling elites — from where the writers came — needed to believe that they were in the process of creating a country that was at once different from the mother country, but also “civilized,” as opposed to the indigenous, non-white, inhabitants. In Benedict Anderson’s words, the elites needed to create “an imagined community.”² That explains why we can find an abundant description of the nature of the country and of indigenous types in literature produced from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century.

The young nations matured, and their societies changed; the changes brought other problems, other anxieties to the forefront, and each of these aspects made their way into the fiction, the poetry, and the drama of the country. The arrival of new aesthetic influences from abroad, new political align-

ments, and the birth of the feminist movement all contributed to a different way of portraying women in Latin American literature. In addition, the recognition and increased acceptance of theoretical tools originating in Psychology and Philosophy have made the field of literary criticism even more vibrant, as the essays in this book demonstrate.

In order to stress the importance of these separate aspects, we have organized this book into five sections, each of them illustrating one issue that women characters have been particularly useful to carry the burden of representing. The contributors created each essay freely, working with ideas that the primary novels themselves suggested, using the theoretical approaches that each contributor found most appropriate for the essay. It was in the task of assembling the manuscript that we felt that, although none of the contributors knew at first which other essays were part of the final product, some texts “dialogued” with one another in very productive ways. This is obviously not to say that each of the essays discusses only the subject suggested by the title of the section; rather, each section serves as an indicator of major lines of thought that they share.

I. Woman as Nature

Literature, of course, is not history. Novels have no obligation to follow a chronological order, and they can, therefore, look back on past events and represent them as a way to look towards the future. To understand how women characters have been used to represent nature, the novel *María* (1867), by the Colombian Jorge Isaacs (1837–1895), is particularly instructive, especially considering that the eponymous character does not appear much in the novel as herself, but rather as the bountiful nature that surrounds the male character. Héctor Fernández-L’Hoeste argues that, precisely because he was a man who felt the sting of discrimination because of his Jewish origin, Isaacs tried to make his novel at the same time a glorification of the land of his country, and an affirmation of his Christian beliefs. But nature has not always been seen as a beneficial agent, and such is the case with *Doña Bárbara* (1929), a novel by Rómulo Gallegos (1884–1969) that can also be read almost as a political platform.

It is necessary to remember that in Latin America especially — but not exclusively — in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, many writers were also politicians. As members of the privileged reading class, they were in the position to enact changes in the form of political and social influence. It is no coincidence that in Latin America so many writers

became politicians or occupied political offices: Bartolomé Mitre in Argentina, José Martí in Cuba, José de Alencar and Aluísio Azevedo in Brazil, Andrés Bello and Rómulo Gallegos in Venezuela, Andrés Bello in Chile.³ For each of these, and many others who occupied regional political positions, literature came hand in hand with politics: first the imagination, then action (or at least the will to action through political office). As Julio Ramos correctly points out, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was a profound connection between literature and politics; actually, they can be said to have been one and the same thing (62–63). In this light, it is possible to say that *Doña Bárbara* can be seen as the best possible political platform advocating the taming of nature and the introduction of “civilizing” processes such as those illustrated in the novel. Gallegos could have used *Doña Bárbara* as his campaign to the presidential office of Venezuela: the male force takes over and dominates the recalcitrant land, preparing it to be husbanded, controlled, and civilized. Patricia L. Swier reminds us, however, that reconceptualizations of gender and sexuality have given the character a new, iconic resonance.

But advancement to the higher office of the land was not always the most desired situation a writer could aspire to. The last essay of this group concerns *Balún Canán* (1957) by the Mexican Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974). We believe that this novel is a provocative bridge between the subject of nature and politics. Here we have a female child narrator who tries to represent the uncertainties, the class and race struggles happening around her. The natural and political world breaking down is the world of the Mexico where the first Mayan inhabitants — once the guardians of nature and of tradition — are being systematically destroyed or rendered as meaningless and undistinguishable as her beloved nanny becomes in the end of the novel. Jeanie Murphy argues that the figure of the father represents the phallogentric, white political culture that understands the land as something possessed by *men*. And here lies the female child’s tragedy: she is the only one who can recognize the indigenous other, but because she is a female, she will not inherit the land, and therefore she will never be able to act upon her knowledge. The land — nature — is still under the power of the white man, no matter (or regardless of) the more grandiose reform plans conceived in the capital of the country.

II. Woman in History

Certain problems tend to reoccur in literature at different historical periods, each time proposing a new way to look at an issue. In every one of these changes, the woman character’s role is expanded and modified to include anx-

ieties about the social and political issues important at that moment. One important development in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the nations were already established as independent entities, was that women writers emerged on the literary scene, moved by the urgency to become active participants in the national discourse.

In RoseAnna Mueller's discussion, the woman character, now, not simply the product of the imagination of a male writer with nation-building intents, appears as the result of a feminine sensibility that can — for lack of a better term — “see the woman's situation from the inside.” The work of Venezuelan Teresa de la Parra (1889–1936) is particularly instructive, because through María Eugenia, the protagonist of *Iphigenia: The diary of a young lady who wrote because she was bored* (1924), she shows how the nation is building its capitalist enterprise on the backs of its daughters, who, in the process, must relinquish any individual identity, as well as financial independence.

With *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) based on the life of Josefina Bórquez (1900–1987), Elena Poniatowska (1932–) tells the life of Jesusa Palancares, a woman who lived and fought during the Mexican Revolution. In Linda Ledford-Miller's discussion, this extremely complex novel illustrates how, in spite of her illiteracy and many difficulties, a woman made history and helped shape the nation alongside men and other women. Another novel that looks back to make connections and shed new light on the Mexican past is *Arráncame la vida* (1985), by Ángeles Mastretta (1949–). The novel is narrated by Catalina, the wife of a strong man who manages to climb the political and social ladder of power through intimidation, torture, and killings. Alice Edwards argues that, as a woman who has access to the most powerful man and does nothing to help the powerless people he persecutes, Catalina can be seen as a projection of La Malinche, the indigenous woman who became Hernán Cortés's translator and lover. Even though Mastretta's novel has been criticized by many, the essay points out that the ambiguity in Catalina's decisions reflects the weight of history and the burden of decisions taken on a personal level by a woman who feels no connection with other women.

But the action need not take place in the grand stage of national politics to refer to the political situation. *La casa de Bernarda Alba: Drama de mujeres en los pueblos de España* (1936) by the Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), is set in a provincial home, and the struggles among the three generations of Bernarda Alba's family can be seen as a representation of the Spanish cultural scene on the verge of the Civil War: not only does Bernarda Alba herself represent a political figure whose importance was reaching alarming proportions at the time García Lorca wrote the play *Francisco Franco*, but she also represents the leftover characteristics of naturalism. The conflict

among all the women in the story, Jeffrey Oxford argues, is a representation of the literary and cultural ethos of Spain, at a time when different styles competed for predominance.

III. Woman as the Perverse Powers of Race and Sex

The two essays in the next section, by Leonora Simonovis and Linda Ledford-Miller, respectively, deal with the matters of race and sex, and how women's bodies have been appropriated to represent a mixture of both, and how, in one case, the woman has to pay with her life because of how she is seen. In *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994) Gabriel García Márquez (1927–) creates Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles, a white child who embodies the black African culture from the slave quarters where she was raised. Her upbringing makes her black, but she is ethnically white, so Sierva María is seen as a monster who provokes violence and blood thirst among the religious people in charge of “exorcizing” her.

In *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (1962), Jorge Amado (1912–2001) presents a different type of racialized female body. Here, the woman Gabriela, even though she is illiterate and not versed in the ways of the urban environment where the story takes place — the town of Ilhéus, in Bahia — manages to carve a space in which she can be celebrated both as a sexual being, and as a woman of color. But even here, it is important to observe that Gabriela's supposed liberation is obtained at the cost of what can be seen as an unobtainable ideal of perpetual youth and beauty at the service of the dominating man.

IV. Woman and the Burden of Globalization

What happens to a country when it is mercilessly penetrated by external influences that feed on the population and transform everyone to fodder for a never satisfied globalized machine of capitalist consumption? Aldona Pobutsky discusses precisely this matter, analyzing a novel that opens with the brutal scene of the rape of the young protagonist. The Colombian Óscar Collazos (1942–) addresses this and other questions with the novel *Rencor* (2006), which takes the reader to a Cartagena shantytown and dramatizes the plight of the poor, especially poor females, in the character Keyla, a young, mixed-race woman whose anger — *rencor* — is the running theme in the novel. Defenseless against her father's incestuous desires, and later defenseless against the fact that the only way she can feed her family is through prostitution, the young char-

acter leads a life of abject violence and unrelenting desperation and ends up alone, defeated, orphaned, and locked up. The novel thus reveals how, even in the twenty-first century, the racialized woman's body still continues functioning as a sex commodity, a process through which she is objectified and abjectified.

In the novel *Única mirando al mar* (1993), the Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro (1963 —) tells the story of Única, a former teacher who loses her job and ends up in a sea of garbage, living with people who live off the garbage. These people, from different parts of the country, embody those who are discarded when their employers no longer find them useful. Jerry Hoeg writes that, because she embodies a realistic portrayal of human nature, the character Única — a woman who never gives up and never gives in — has become a symbol of ecological devastation, as well as an indictment of consumer society. In spite of its scathing critique of the system that allows the continuation of the depletion of the natural resources, the Costa Rican Ministry of Education made the novel obligatory reading for all ninth graders, and it has been successfully adapted for the stage.

V. Woman as the Unknowable Other

The essays in this last section, by María Fernández-Lamarque, Lisa Merschel, and Marcus V.C. Brasileiro, concentrate on the discussion of woman as Other. Fernández-Lamarque concentrates on the work of Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), and begins with a question about the seeming scarcity of female protagonists in his fiction. Considering the issue through an analysis of the short story “El Zahir,” the essay evokes the idea of the thread of the *histos* as it is used by Jacques Derrida. Both the woman character Teodelina Villar and the coin called “El Zahir” coexist in the story and are internally connected, as the narrator “Borges” realizes after receiving the coin after her death. The woman, in this case, is the alter-ego of the narrator, at the same time she is also his obsession.

The work by Chilean writer María Flora Yáñez (1901–1981), although little known outside her native country, constitutes an important moment of women's literature in Latin America. The fact that, even though she belonged to the elite of her country, Yáñez could not initially publish under her own name, shows — as Lisa Merschel reminds us — the kind of obstacles that existed for women at the time. Barred from political life as other women writers of her time, Yáñez herself noted that Virginia Woolf was barred from entering male dominated “turf,” and considered the British writer an inspiration. It is no wonder, therefore, that *Cenizas* (1949) concentrates on the psychological life