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## Women: Prisoners of the Word

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# Women: Prisoners of the Word

Alvina E. QUINTANA

Language, when viewed as a set of intricate symbols used to define or symbolically represent existence, preserving knowledge as well as providing an outlet for aesthetic pleasure and intellectual thought, appears to represent a nonthreatening and essential form. It is, however, interesting to take language a step further, using it as a tool with the power to enforce specific value systems, representing and, more dangerous still, dictating, controlling, and categorizing. Language, in this sense, can be seen as a violent force, ripping through individuals as well as cultures, in order to create units of preservable information. Ralph Ellison illuminates the paradox created by the word when he states "For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it also has the power to blind, imprison, and destroy."<sup>1</sup> When Lévi-Strauss represents primitive cultures (the other), he is effectively giving birth to them, in the Western academic context, so that we may experience or understand them. Those cultures exist for us because he has recorded and interpreted them, textualizing them, and thus making them exist. This process is the same practiced in most developed industrial cultures, where an individual's existence is recognized after being textualized by birth records, naming, christening, and so forth. In many of these cultures, the word speaks to individuals the moment they are born, defining parameters according to gender. For women, the word then takes on a pervasive quality at the moment of birth, since it defines on one hand and alienates on another. Women are constantly confronted with the problem of the misrepresentation masculine desire and discourse bring about, with the problem of seeking definition within a male framework. As Hélène Cixous points out, "even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of 'being,' a question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse."<sup>2</sup> We are thus caught by the word's power to blind and

imprison. How do we move from this language of misrepresentation to the language of self-understanding, move away from the word as an imprisoning and alienating force to the word in its liberating sense? One way of becoming more conscious of language as both a repressive and a liberating force is through writing.

Literature provides the medium to voice female concerns much as current ideology provides the medium for male discourse. Writing serves as a vehicle for the demystification through self-representation of that unity we call woman. It provides the stage for a multiplicity of voices, experiences, issues which speak to the subordination of women to ideology, and thus replaces the oversimplistic stereotypes so often used to categorize and define women. We should therefore begin to look at women's literary works as not only an alternative to but a counterpart of traditional social scientific feminist theory. Women's literature is important because it allows the opportunity to articulate opposing views in a nonthreatening, nonauthoritarian form, which feels natural and is accessible to most women regardless of race or class. Literature has always reflected the ideology and social conditions of its time, yet it is usually dismissed as insignificant when historians or social scientists theorize. Literature maintains a lower status because of its fictional quality, whereas history, based on fact, is looked upon as truth in its highest and most objective form. But as Terry Eagleton, Marxist literary critic, points out, "Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the social mentality of ideology of an age."<sup>3</sup> Women's literary works when viewed in the way Eagleton describes are an essential part of feminist theory, as they embroider traditional feminist theory with issues and experiences rooted in the female consciousness. When we begin to move away from our dualistic way of compartmentalizing literature as false and the social sciences as true, merging the two instead, we will begin to open the doors for a more sensitive type of theorizing about cultures and individuals. Studying the social sciences and literature together sets the stage for a more realistic type of theorizing which will eventually eliminate the ineffective, outdated, and above all inaccurate type of analysis which holds women hostage today. Women's literature provides the method, the voices, experiences, and rituals involved in growing up female.

Women writers like ethnographers focus on microcosms within a culture, unpacking rituals in the context of inherited symbolic and social structures of subjugation. Women writers are acting as their own ethnographers, using the word for self-representation. This kind of self-representation marks a significant step toward the kind of liberation Ellison speaks of and Hélène Cixous refers to as the possibility for change, "the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."<sup>4</sup>

Kitzia Hoffman and Sylvina Bullrich are two Latina writers who through their short stories show us the limitations women are confronted within Latino society. In "Old Adelina," Kitzia Hoffman weaves a tale around an old Mexican *curandera* named Adelina. Hoffman's character is preoccupied with her decision, made as a young girl, to blind herself by gazing into the sun. As the story opens, we find Adelina in a total state of powerlessness and invisibility:

Adelina, old Adelina, was left alone, seated on the sidewalk. After a few moments, it would even have been easy to overlook her presence. She seemed to be just another unevenness in the stone pavement. That was Adelina. She had the rare gift not only of being, but of belonging to and becoming part of any place where she settled.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this story Adelina reflects back over her years in an uneasy attempt to understand her tragic life. As a girl, Adelina was forced to leave town after being accused of causing many of her neighbors harm with her "mal de ojo." Because of superstition and a network of gossip that limits and defines women, the townspeople blame Adelina's psychic powers for every minor calamity. The use of language as a tool of power to subordinate women is very clear in "Old Adelina"—language in the form of gossip and superstition is used to "other" Adelina and drive her out of town. In order to ensure that she will never again be forced to flee any other town, Adelina decides to blind herself. She sacrifices her sight, family, and home, to gain acceptance; she surrenders, in a single act that denies her identity,

everything for the demands of her culture. Throughout the story Adelina is haunted by one question: "Does everyone in the world have to burn something in order to be able to live among their fellows?" The obvious answer to Adelina's question is yes, but the tragedy of the story for Adelina, and for all women by implication, is that the price she pays is far too much "to be just another unevenness in the stone pavement." Walter Benjamin says that all stories are about death;<sup>6</sup> here we see death forcing the end of the story, and measuring an old women's life:

The bitter taste came into her mouth when she thought of this. What a price she had paid for her place among the women in the market. Oh God what a price.

If she had not burned out her eyes staring at the sun . . . if she had had the courage to be different from others and to hold on to her strong sight without running away.<sup>7</sup>

Hoffman's story ends with Adelina realizing the enormity of the price she has paid for "her place . . . in the market."

In "The Bridge," Argentinean author Sylvina Bullrich introduces the reader to Patricia, an aggressive, rebellious woman with a desire to escape what she calls tedious and provincial. Patricia is obsessed with the prospect of having a bridge built in her town to join the island on which she lives with the outside world. The bridge is obviously a metaphor for escape. Patricia is educated and in love with progress, yet she is confined to the obsolescence that her culture reserves for women no matter what their education. Because Patricia is a woman, she is constantly told that her dreaming of bridges is inappropriate and that she should concern herself with more womanly things such as cooking, sewing, and making babies. Finally, in an act striving for self-fulfillment, Patricia sacrifices herself, marrying an older man, an engineer she does not love, in hopes of achieving her dream. Her husband shares Patricia's vision and brings with him the method and the means necessary to transform Patricia's dream to reality. Patricia's engineer and bridge are important for her because, as she explains, "Both were an escape from a tedious and provincial home, from that which was too stable and ossified." It is clear that Patricia wants vicariously to build that bridge of her dreams, sacrificing the only thing she has as a

woman, herself. Patricia reveals the extent of her dreams when she tells her husband about her visions for female liberation:

We will be strange missionaries, we will go building links around the world, we will go around providing bridges so that no young girl with a free soul will have the feeling that the world has forgotten her.<sup>8</sup>

Patricia's dreams reveal her desperate desire for change and progress, especially where young women are concerned. While Patricia's husband, Eugenio, initially shares her dreams, she gradually begins to detect a change in his attitude regarding the construction of the bridge:

Before his urgency was as great as mine; now it was tempered. When I asked for precise details—the date when work was to begin, the time required to finish—his voice wavered, and he started his answers with vague expression such as “God willing,” “If time permits,” “If no one objects,” “If there are no obstacles,” “If no unforeseen circumstances arise,” “If the cabinet isn't changed,” “If the next government lends its support.” The threats that hung over the bridge were so many I began to feel a real anxiety. I communicated this feeling, and Eugenio ended up angry.<sup>9</sup>

What Patricia describes as vague expressions can be viewed as the mystification of the male-controlled bureaucracy. Eugenio soon understands that the powerful men of their town have no interest in having a bridge constructed. A bridge in their eyes, as in Patricia's, would serve to bring civilization. But, unlike Patricia, these men believe that when “civilization arrives, troubles come.” Eugenio is faced with making a choice between his wife's dreams of building the bridge, which will bring a lack of work and money, or conforming to the male perception of power and social order, a choice which promises employment and survival. Eugenio's decision is in line with the men and against his wife's insistence. Patricia does not appear to understand how powerless her husband's position is and feels that with more patience and sacrifices their bridge can still become a reality. It is interesting to note the change in attitude of the

townspeople once Eugenio makes his decision to put his plans for the bridge aside. His position of powerlessness and invisibility quickly becomes one of power and visibility.

As soon as it was known that Eugenio was working with Don Aristides and Don Fortunato, we were both much sought after. After all, no one could move from Rio Dorado without the aid of those two.

“It’s good, Engineer, we need a bigger boat and another ferry. We know the bridge is most important, but in the meantime you have to live, right? We thought that a man like yourself, born here, wouldn’t be indifferent to our needs.”

Eugenio smiled, flattered and surprised when he was so often stopped on the street, he who up until a few days ago seemed invisible.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, Patricia’s dreams are never realized. Instead of developing her “free soul” and cultivating more dreams for a more balanced world of gender potential, Patricia accepts her role as wife and mother, the role she once dreamed of escaping. Patricia’s sacrifice is made in vain, as her dreams of progress and visions of a better world for women are simply dismissed as the irrational thoughts of a young, inexperienced, and rebellious child.

Both “Old Adelina” and “The Bridge” provide representations of women in conflict with their male-defined place in society. Hoffman and Bullrich develop rich but tragic stories about their protagonists, emphasizing the subordination of women to ideology. Although the characters in these stories differ in respect to age, ethnicity, and social position, they are both women struggling with cultural limitations and female issues. Both stories speak of the unfulfilled lives of women; they speak of the need to sacrifice oneself as a strategy for survival, of the need to conform to the dictates of the patriarchy. Julia Kristeva’s concept of the socio-contract, “the sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences,” is acted out tragically by both Adelina and Patricia. Patricia’s love for progress and desire for change are direct results of her education, her literacy.

It is her ability to manipulate complex language that reveals the limitations of the woman's role in her culture, the source of her frustration. Adelina realizes as an old lady that she has sacrificed too much, while Patricia, after conforming and sacrificing her "free soul," feels that she has not sacrificed enough. One woman begins by sacrificing her eyes, the other her soul; both women remain unhappy and unfulfilled in spite of their sacrifices.

Hoffman and Bullrich, like ethnographers, have succeeded in representing two women addressing issues of female subjugation brought about by masculine expectations and discourse, by ideology and history. As both stories are representations of women defeated by the limitations and expectations of their cultures, they illustrate how the word has the power to imprison and destroy. But on another level these stories are like springboards for transformation (using Cixous's analogy), functioning as liberating forces since they awaken and raise the consciousness of all who read them. These two storytellers are acting as counselors defining issues, articulating the female condition in their respective societies. Walter Benjamin makes a point that is relevant here:

In every case the storyteller is a man (woman), who has counsel for his readers . . . After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man [women] is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he [she] allows he [her] situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

Before we can move toward the transformation of social and cultural structures, it is first necessary to understand our past and present situations. As Benjamin points out, the storyteller does not necessarily provide an answer but does offer a proposal concerning the stories' possible outcome. Benjamin goes on to explain how the art of storytelling provides us with the symptoms of the secular productive forces of history, a point which is



generally overlooked by most social scientists. Both Hoffman and Bullrich are effective as storytellers because they bring to the public clear political messages regarding the limitations women are confronted with in Latino society; they awaken minds and create the urgency necessary for the kind of subversive thought Cixous speaks of, which ultimately leads to the possibility of change. In both stories the authors' writing is analogous to the bridge metaphor Bullrich elicits, reaching out to other women, linking them to one another so that no woman with a free spirit will feel the world has forgotten her, so that women who have felt trapped or imprisoned by the word can also begin to look to the word for its reviving and liberating force.

Hoffman and Bullrich have taken the first steps toward the understanding of the self-imposed sacrificial contract Latina women willingly commit themselves to; they use the literary form to diagnose the conditions of women's inequality and in the process give the world two finely crafted stories that are rich in ideological promise. For Marcelle Thiebaut, it is this kind of writing that begins to break ground for female discourse, creating balance and understanding.

When the female reader is not central—as is usual in masculinist writing—the patriarchal discourse embraces the whole Woman/Book image and incorporates it into further discourse of its own, wrenching the woman from the book and creating a realm of knowledge from which the woman is excluded, shut out of the library entirely. The only way for woman to create her own discourse is to create her own library.<sup>12</sup>

Stories like "Old Adelina" and "The Bridge," while addressing current ideological concerns of women, also serve to bridge the gap between ideology and history by addressing female patterns of ultimate sacrifice. The issue of sacrifice in Latino culture is directly related to the representation of Latina women in masculine myth, history, and ideology.

Sylvia Gonzales and Norma Alarcón are two Chicanas who understand how language and writing have been dominated by masculine discourse and used to subjugate and exploit female

consciousness. Mexican history and ideology are predominantly masculine in perspective, and because of this they have been used to control rather than enlighten women. Women are characterized as weak, passive, and totally dependent on men for their meaning. The masculine domination of language has therefore led to the domination of women. Norma Alarcón shows how the masculine myth of Malintzin affects male and female thought:

Because the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred. All we see is hatred of women. We must hate her too since love seems only possible through extreme virtue whose definition is at best slippery.<sup>13</sup>

The language of our history becomes a corruptive force when accepted at face value, without taking into account the limitations, authority, or perspective of its textualized discourse. The poet Sylvia Gonzales must have realized the pervasive quality of masculine historical discourse. In her poem "Chicana Evolution" she cries with the pain of literacy as she speaks of a second rape:

I am Chicana  
 But while you developed  
 in the womb,  
 I was raped again.  
 I am Chicana  
 In a holocaust of sperm,  
 bitter fragments of fertilization  
 mankind's victim,  
 humankind's burden.<sup>14</sup>

To understand Gonzales's poem it is necessary to understand the myth of Malintzin, to place it in its proper context. Gonzales is effective in using her poetry to transmit ideological con-

cerns, to bring to life the ambivalent distaste and fear of women in Mexican/Chicano history and culture. She is trying to dispel the myth that Chicanas are inferior because they are women. Women's writing provides the means by which to implement change in history and ideology. For Mexicanas/Chicanas this change translates into the possibility of defining ourselves in history, liberating women and men from the oppressive roles which have been handed down by masculine discourse, which recognizes Hernán Cortés as the leader of the conquest of the Aztec civilization while Malintzin, who is associated with the birth of a people, is seen predominantly as the traitor of the race. Her gift for language, her betrayal, her intercourse, destroyed one culture and gave life to another. She is thus simultaneously held responsible for killing and creating. In this respect Malintzin has been compared by some scholars to Eve, mother of humankind and original evil woman. Malintzin served as the vehicle for Cortés's success, transmitting, translating information for the man she believed to be her savior, Quetzalcoatl, with whom she immediately aligned herself for the betterment of her people. It was largely because of Malintzin's linguistic skill that Cortés was able to move so swiftly on the Aztec empire. Because of Malinche, Mexicanos, as mestizos, are the "offspring of violation," reaffirming the belief that if La Malinche is to be demeaned and denigrated, naturally her children will have to be considered accordingly.

Women writing in their own behalf will help discard the outdated sexist ideology of the past, moving language and history to a more realistic and holistic approach which is needed for the gender-balanced ideology of the future. Unless women begin to tell their own stories, they will continue to be what all Chicanos have been called, the bastard children of the universe, in the sense that they will continue to be raped by the word of textualized representations written by the patriarch, and rationalized by society and ideology. For Hélène Cixous the act of woman writing herself

. . . will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, that

cause breath and speech at the same time . . . A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.<sup>16</sup>

Women's writing in itself does not provide the solution but rather creates a balance in written discourse and marks an important and essential step toward a more holistic approach to understanding issues concerning female misrepresentation and subordination. The problems with language will then move from the initial structural ones, involving content and form, to those more pressing concerns dealing with power, authority, and control. Writing provides a double-edged reality, as Ellison points out, with the possibility of reviving or imprisoning a people. When will we move from the language of rape? How do we move from the violence of the word onto the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of the letter?

## NOTES

1. Ralph Ellison, "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," in *Images of the Negro in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 155.
2. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," in *New French Feminisms* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).
3. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
4. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*.
5. Kitzia Hoffman, "Old Adelina," in *Latin American Literature Today* (New York: New American Library/Mentor, 1977).
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).
7. Hoffman, "Old Adelina."
8. Sylvina Bullrich, "The Bridge," in *Latin American Literature Today*.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (emphasis on gender mine).
12. Marcelle Thiebaut, "Foucault's Fantasia for Feminists: The Woman Reading," in *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Bilingual Press, 1982).
13. Norma Alarcón, "Chicanas' Feminist Literature: A Revision through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981).
14. Sylvia Gonzales, "Chicana Evolution," in *The Third Woman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980).
15. Adelaida del Castillo, "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective," *Essays on La Mujer*, ed. Rosaura Sánchez and Rosa Martínez Cruz (Los Angeles: University of California, Chicano Studies Center Publications, 1977), p. 144.
16. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."