

# Images of the feminine in Cuban literature

by Lillian Bertot Ph.D.

“We already know from the modern, philosophical point of view, I will say, the Sacred Writings are anti-feminist, and the laws which govern us, being inspired in great part by them, are anti-feminists also. But any woman who would take them into consideration and be for or against them, would become a feminist, because what these laws deny them is to think with their own head and in some cases to act according to their will. (Alfonsina Storni, *La nota* [The Note] 4.202 (June 27, 1919: 682 in Gwen Kirkpatrick “The Journalism of Alfonsina Storni,” p. 116).

The discourse of Cuban feminism is inserted in the discourse of Hispanic-American feminism. Although women’s topics take on different aspects and are defined in their own way at different times, in Cuba or in Argentina, the struggle of women for political, economic, and social equality transcends national borders and unites the hemisphere. The international environment always was the most favorable forum for its existential as well as literary expression.

The “imaginary eras” as Lezama Lima defined them are nourished in a very special way, as was to be expected, by the topic of the feminine. The irradiation of the feminine image in Cuban literature encompasses the areas defined by the epochs in a country rooted in Western tradition with very specific experiences of displacement, of individual freedom, open spaces, ethnicities and the mutual need of the sexes to participate in social as well as economic activities.

The centuries-old cultural structures that have been distilled down to this concept are oppressive for women, and even for men struggling for survival in Cuba, in an environment hostile to reason, growth, ideological independence, and social, political, and economic transformations, also to modernity. From the beginning, the creation of the Cuban state/nation has exhibited patriarchal modalities of great rigidity, from its imposed colonialist conception to its current forceful and absolute permanence. Although quite typical in Spanish America, these structures have collected their high cost of marginality and the social, economic, and cultural impoverishment of Cuban women.

Colonial Cuba was far from being a society where women’s rights and their condition of equality were recognized. Socialist Cuba subordinates the rights of the individual to the common good, however defined by the *caudillo* [strong man], and the rights of women are subordinated to a mass organization, they themselves an instrument of the masculine-militaristic state that has robbed them of their

conscience and their will to act.

Although there are differences among the women as far as levels of economic impoverishment, since one could not consider equal the economic state of a slave to that of an urban housewife, economically. The women of the colony, white or black, depended on the man, or the patriarchy, or the master. Economic dependence and as a consequence cultural dependence, in all social and political environments in Cuba demanded women to behave in a certain way, to play a role in the society at that time. In present-day Cuba the economic dependence and the exacerbated patriarchy of the Commander in chief is personalized in a totalizing state, again enslaving Cuban women as it is again enslaving Cuba’s men.

We continue to ask, how was the feminine portrayed? And I say portrayed, because the images of women we have seen in Cuban literature up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are really images of women expressed by men. In Cuba, it is not until toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that we begin to see a feminine character that is the creation of another woman, or the feminine thought by a woman, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. In Avellaneda’s novel *Sab*, a white woman, a young lady in a private home, lives in her *quasi* fantasy an erotic/passionate episode with a black slave. The novel was a complete scandal.

I wonder if it had been possible for a male Cuban writer of the time to write such a novel. Could it have been possible for a French writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the century of French realism, to have written a novel with such a topic? Obviously not. But, what did this novel postulate that produced such a scandal? If not its eroticism, that was already a transgression of the feminine Cuban-Judeo-Christian myth of feminine purity, it was its more basic proposition and more subversive of the Cuban social order: that of the equality of the human condition. If a white man of the times could want, have, love, and engender children with black women, why not a white woman?

Cuba weighed heavily on Doña Gertrudis. She wanted to go in search of new horizons and left with her family for Spain, since coincidentally the same was true of her stepfather. There, she came face to face with the patriarchy when refusing to marry a Spanish gentleman chosen by her uncle, she had to leave Madrid with her brother and go to Seville. There, insisting on her condition as a writer, while living in penury and suffering through tragic love affairs, the critics granted her the epithet of “being a lot of man” for her daring and passion, contributing to the perception that her contemporaries had, since these characteristics did not fit in the model prescribed for the behavior of a lady.

The code of the times dictated that women were the passive agent in a relationship between the sexes, man always in a position of power over women’s and his desire over hers. Even in a more intimate relationship between the sexes the code became manifest, since not even the home

was a product of the feminine, but of the male order, when man as the provider tyrannized (and still does). Her letters are indispensable to penetrate her most intimate thoughts, although her poetry also reveals the images that pertain to her own experience.

Avellaneda is hurt by the indifference of the man she loves. It leaves her prostrate. Almost one century later, Alfonsina Storni, the Argentinean writer goes beyond Avellaneda's pain using the irony of Sor Juana, the Mexican nun, preceding Avellaneda's demands for equality by almost a century. Storni will create a type of man who is worthy of her. She is going to propose through her activism and political militancy an order that considers the realities of the feminine. If Sister Juana's voyage was essential, Avellaneda's journey was existential. Storni committed suicide.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brings other images of the transformation of the feminine in Cuban literature. However, it is necessary to take a retrospective look over the perception of the feminine in Cuban literature before Avellaneda. If we take an anthological journey of Cuban literature before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of the feminine was formed by the notion of women as objects. The objectified woman, is man's object of adoration, of respect, of desire, but always distant, like the naiads, like the nymphs, like the deities of the water, like the ideal and unreachable lover, or the reason of his toils and tribulations, or like the mother, or like the sister, or like the relegated lover, or the wife, or the illegitimate daughter, or like the virgin, or like Ochún, or like a *mambisa*, but always in relation to the man and his order. She is always in the periphery of the vortex, never in its center. She is always reactive, rarely proactive. The white woman and the black woman form a submissive sisterhood in such an order. Their submission is absolute.

The questioning of the proposed patriarchal order although begun, has not yielded its fruits, neither consequential nor durable. If the men have been the victims, the women have been doubly victimized, since men played the game of men, but Cuban women have rarely seen their own images actualized. Rarely has sensibility been practiced in Cuba, the cult to motherhood and child care. These were legislated after almost a century of feminist militancy. Cecilia Valdés, the protagonist in the novel by the same name by Cirilo Villaverde was the product of the desacralization of motherhood, of infidelity, of lies, of the syndrome wife and lover, not wife/lover, which fragments the feminine in the masculine Cuban psyche. That fragmentation is not due exclusively to the racial stimulus and is not related exclusively to the black lover/ the white wife, and in that sense it closely approximates that pathology where in general, there is no reconciliation with the feminine.

That fragmentation can be seen in the poetry of Belkis Cuza Malé, a contemporary female Cuban poet, where the world, reality, remains totally broken up, shattered into fragments, kaleidoscopic, in pieces, where there is no dis-

tinguishable form, where order has been totally destroyed. Coincidentally perhaps, Cuza Malé chooses as her character for one of her works, Ana Frank. The only thing that transcends the fragmentation of this collection in style and form is the feeling of the young Jewish girl in Nazi Germany of imprisonment, of enclosure, of being surrounded by something that she does not understand and in which she could not participate, but that she knew had to be destroyed, because her survival depended on it.

In Cuba the game of arbitration and persuasion has rarely been played, neither has reason prevailed above force, nor durable peace above all else, nor everybody's participation in the political or cultural arenas. In other words the games of transformation and growth have not been played, and both are characteristics of the feminine.

The right to vote was granted to Cuban women in 1940. Thusly was the feminine defined in Cuba in 1938. And for some years the republic survived. However, equality never achieved, oppression and injustice define the feminine in Cuba as in the diaspora.

Masculine selfishness impeded granting the *mambisas* in political and epistemological terms a definition as human beings when their rights were denied at the Guáimaro Constitutional Assembly upon a request made by Ana Betancourt in the mid-eighteen hundreds. How contrary to the recognition that José Martí gives Spanish American women in Venezuela. There they come out of anonymity, from the shadow of men to grow to an almost legendary size. What pity that the warring epic was women's only claim to equality, to heroism, what a pity that they followed the men in war, for in war the men were the "true heroes".

I do not know of any Spanish American epic poem with a feminine protagonist possessing true character and high rank, similar to that of the masculine characters. The Spanish American woman, except for rare exceptions, like Doña Barbara in the novel by Rómulo Gallegos, appears objectified, powerless in the face of love or the favor of men, fascinated with their dispensations, and as victims of the kind of society men have created.

On the other hand, the feminine characters in twentieth century Cuban literature appear, in general, empty or fatuous. *Three Sad Tigers* by Guillermo Cabrera Infante and *Memoirs of Underdevelopment* by Edmundo Desnoes are two examples. With the disintegration of the family in the Havana society of the thirties, forties and the fifties the incipient but never realized Cuban matriarchy started losing its luster, see the novel *Paradiso* by José Lezama Lima written in the seventies. The heroines of Cabrera and Desnoes appears swallowed by their own frivolous idleness. The woman/mother is the hero in *Paradiso*. The self-realized woman, who is part of the labor force, who labored in freedom and ethics within the social and economic structures of the country, although an ephemeral social reality during the republic, never surfaced as a character in

Cuban literature. The feminist militant, that had been a social type, although quite exclusively and in the minority, never rose to the level of a fiction character either, it was substituted by the revolutionary alphabetizer set out to wipe out illiteracy, or the militia women, or the technocrat swallowed by the state in the new pamphleteer literature of socialist realism.

After *Paradiso*, that contrary to the trend in Spanish American fiction of disintegration of the family and alienation, exalts the Cuban family and specifically the mother in the son's upbringing, the feminine *buildumromance* was never written in Cuba. The trajectory toward gnosis in the protagonist Fornaris in *Paradiso* has never been portrayed in a single feminine character in Cuban literature. Daina Chaviano in her *Man, Woman and Hunger* written in the nineties, and in exile, creates a character who salvages her integrity as a person, by leaving the country.

Within the context of masculine egocentrism women continue being at the service and dominion of the masculine. Twentieth century Cuban literature has not produced feminist writers as transcendent as Storni, or Juana de Ibarbouru, or Gabriela Mistral, but it has produced feminist men. Beginning with Cirilo Villaverde in the early part of the century and finishing by Reinaldo Arenas, who committed suicide in 1990.

It is almost as if in a double rupture the feminine had to be rescued by the masculine that had destroyed it. It is of vital importance.

In *North of Hell*, a novel by Miguel Correa, the only voice, although weak, that still denounces the rights violations in Cuban contemporary society, is the feminine voice. However, in *Again the Sea* Reinaldo Arenas creates a feminine character who is in fact the alter-ego of the masculine character, Héctor. Only at the end of the novel and before Hector commits suicide do we know that his wife had been a product of his fantasy and where not even that hint a Pigmalion complex saves him. In the novel *In my garden heroes go to pasture* by Heberto Padilla, the main character, fascinated by the numinos archetype of the great male (of the Terrible Father) only perceives the presence of his wife as evanescence. In fact, nothing is as important as the image of the *comandante*. Arenas' feminine characters in *Celestino Before Dawn* and *The palace of the very white skunks* are all unredeemed. Even the most ethical character in terms of the feminine in the more recent Cuban literature is the "Old Rose" one of Arenas' characters, a character weakened at the face of the fateful destruction by the revolution of a world she had built. But, while this is true, his male characters are also unredeemed.

In Arenas posthumous work *The Color of Summer* the devastation of Cuba, not only of the feminine, is total. So it is that in the theater piece he wrote by way of a preface to the novel, a slapstick farce: "The Flight of Avellaneda: First Act (of repudiation)."

"The Flight of Avellaneda" precedes a series of vignettes depicting the Havana gay world of the seventies. Avellaneda is attempting to leave Cuba. She is leaving in a precarious boat about to capsize at any moment. In Cuba, Fifo organizes an act of repudiation at Havana's pier, with the attendance of his retinue of flatterers. At the same time in Key West, a reception is organized, and the crowd throws chocolate bars at her. From Cuba they throw insulting, degrading and filthy words at her as well as all kinds objects and projectiles, which upon making an impact threaten to sink her small, fragile vessel.

As a result of an accidental flame blasted out by Martí's flamethrower as he makes his way back to Cuba flying over her, Avellaneda's boat capsizes in the middle of the Florida Straights, neither leaving nor arriving at any shore. Avellaneda goes down in flames. This happens minutes after they kill Martí in Cuba. Martí refuses to save Avellaneda repeating the rite of the eternal return, now a motif, he returns to Cuba knowing that they would kill him again, without any transcendence, a habitual expression, a ritual, because the myth is already dead.

*The Flight of Avellaneda* symbolizes the total collapse of Cuban mythology. Through jeering, mocking, and deriding, the Cuban nihilist weapon par excellence (Jorge Mañach used the term to refer to a Cuban cultural trait in 1928 in his essay *Inquiry on Jeering*) iconoclastic and by way of self-criticism, Arenas destroys three Cuban myths: Heredia, Martí, and Avellaneda.

Literary profanity puts an end to what ethical profanity had annihilated. Disrespect toward art, toward the ideal, toward the feminine, toward the myth is symptomatic of its lackluster, its decadence, and its disappearance. This is why this theater piece is so painful, that is why this comedy is so tragic.

But, what can we expect from a society that has substituted the feminine for the concept of Revolution, that is a masculine postulate? When the great male takes possession of the feminine and of the masculine, when the Terrible Father irradiates the images of possession or destruction, will the feminine archetype, that of the great mother, the goddess, the queen, the good mother, wisdom rescue the collective unconscious from the irradiations of war, of absolute control, of the construction of the nation/state, of the archetype of the Terrible Father, even more terrible when the individual is weakest to confront him, when the ego is bent and other forces of the unconscious are obliterated? It seems the patriarchy will have to surrender in the ashes of its own destruction, for it will no longer have neither sons nor daughters to destroy.

However, in *Arthur, the brightest star* Arenas creates a character, Arthur, whose mother, Rosa, the terrible mother, leads the same army (the Cuban army) that is supposed to kill him. The son in Arenas' mythology is a victim of both the father and the terrible mother, archetypes that seem to

have produced their irradiations in the Cuban imaginary eras.

The topic of parricide in terms of both the father and the mother surfaces in the contemporary theater of José Triana. In his play, *The night of the assassins*, the first act develops as the children plan the murder of their parents. In the second act the parents are transformed into the state.

In the more recent work by female Cuban writer Zoé Valdés, *The daily nothingness*, the feminine characters she creates are vile- base women and prostitutes who live in degradation in a society where sex exchanged for money or for anything else seems to have substituted all other human relations. It also happens that in Daina Chaviano's novel *Man, Woman and Hunger*, the feminine character recovers some of her own identity and integrity only when she is able to leave the country.

According to Erich Neumann in his book *The Great Mother, an analysis of the archetype* (1972): "The matriarchal spirit doesn't deny its native maternal earth from which it emanates. It does not do as the Apollo-solar-patriarchal spirit that presents itself a "total being, as pure existence in absolute eternity. The feminine is nourished by existence itself, transformation is its essential nature, as is the nourishment and protection of its fruits. Perpetuity and the eternal are incarnate in the feminine, as are renewal and the inclusion of all of its children." And, although change could come as could be seen in the case of the archetype of the Terrible Mother, as an insurmountable test that leads to the death, where the feminine ogre like her male counterpart devour their children, in case the change is filled with the numinosity of the archetype of the Great Mother, the one that nurtures us with its images, the change has to necessarily be one of growth and the expansion of our conscience. The feminine is life and it is death in an endless cycle of emanations of the spirit. Perhaps the absence of the Good Mother, would lead to us look for its essence, and we understand the urgency of its restitution. Only so will the correlations of the feminine emanate from the collective unconscious, a constellation of all but absent images in Cuban literature.