

# Questions of Gender in Latin American Literature

*Questões de gênero na literatura  
latino-americana*

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## Resenha

Ileana Rodríguez. *House, Garden, Nation: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity in Post-Colonial Latin American Literatures by Women*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994.

In *House, Garden, Nation* (1994), a study of five centro-Caribbean women writers' narratives of nation-formation, literary critic Ileana Rodríguez takes up the theme of "the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and nation in times of transition to Modernity" (1) as they have been inscribed in the work of upper class "women of porcelain" living at and writing about the dawn or the dusk of Modernity. Venezuelan writer Teresa de la Parra's novel *Ifigenia: Diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba* (1926), written during that country's transition from independence to modernity; Dulce María Loynaz' novel *Jardín* (1935), which traces the Cuban transition to independence; the Jamaican novel *Wild Sargasso Sea* (1966), in which Jean Rhys writes about that island's two transitions, of 1932 and 1962;

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Guadalupan writer Simone Schwarz-Bart's two novels *Pluie et vent sur Telumée miracle* (1972) and *Ti Jean L'Horizon* (1979), framed by "the specter" (1) of that island's transition from slavery to free labor; and Gioconda Belli's two accounts of the contemporary Nicaraguan post-revolutionary transition, *La mujer habitada* (1988) and *Sofía de los presagios* (1990). The originality and timeliness of Rodríguez' theme, as well as the ingenuity and insight of her analysis, make this book a worthwhile read for students of Latin American cultural history regardless of their disciplinary leanings.

From the start Rodríguez engages us in a reading that is at once provocative and elusive. This elusiveness results from the combined effects of the works under scrutiny ("in these narratives of nation-formation there remain loose and unclear ends," (14) claims Rodríguez) and the author's deliberately non-linear method. This method, as Rodríguez describes it, "works by accumulation and often makes its point at the end, when the overwhelming accumulation of evidence proves my point for me" (166). The approach is quite effective, if challenging to those readers in the social sciences who have grown accustomed to explicitly argued, if often reductive, modes of exposition. That Rodríguez would gloss this approach as "feminine," however, is less convincing, suggesting a simplified analogy between the oppositions Positivist/anti-Positivist and masculine/feminine, a reduction which does not do justice to Rodríguez' fascinating exposition of the complex tension between the "traditional" and "modern", or Positivist and Marxist, sensibilities of these five women writers and their (male and female) characters. Nonetheless, what is interesting about this initial referencing of her own work in relation to literary things "feminine," is the way in which Rodríguez initiates an implicit affiliation between herself and the women writers who are her subject. For they too are characterized as writing narratives redolent with qualities Rodríguez identifies as specifically "feminine," and in this sense distinct from and at times oppositional to, dominant and thus "masculine" texts of nation formation.

In her exploration of these five writers' narratives Rodríguez uncovers a profound ambivalence towards the dominant male ideologies of nationhood and citizenship – whether (neo) Positivist or (revolutionary) Marxist – with whom they were in dialogue, as they struggle to locate themselves within the Nation, a place Rodríguez claims they are all excluded from by virtue of their gender. Rodríguez organizes the book in a way that establishes and affirms her proposition and conclusion that "without the dominant principles of masculinity, the feminine debate limped along" (15). The first section, boldly entitled "The Masculine," addresses the discourses and ideologies which constitute the dominant literary frameworks for figuring the nation in relation to gender, class, and ethnicity. The second section, "The

Feminine," is thus set up in an equivocal relationship to those masculine narratives in terms of which the women writers' texts are constituted.

In "The Masculine," Rodríguez plots ideas of Civilization and Progress in the national novels of Rómulo Gallegos, José Eustasio Rivera and Ricardo Güiraldes, male authors who encode the Neo-Positivist obsession with production and property as enclosed spaces of land and labor. Ethnicity and women figure in these narratives only as exclusions or tropes for private property and the means to capital accumulation. The second, revolutionary transition, encoded in the testimonial literature of such authors as Omar Cabezas and José de Jesús Martínez, proclaims its repudiation of the Neo-Positivist order in the name of Sovereignty and Independence, but hardly veers from its epistemological and developmental trajectory. The New Man reproduces the liberal sensibilities and ideologies of the old, as it were.

The opposition Rodríguez establishes between the masculine and feminine encoded by the Nation is woven through her analysis, pointing at every turn to the subtle and often surprising ways in which the five women writers both borrow and deviate from (masculine) master narratives of nation and state, alternately adopting or transforming masculine tropes such as to open a space for their own sensibilities and spheres of value. Both Gallegos and de la Parra, for example, symbolize their yearning for nation in the will to organize spaces. However, the spaces that are meaningful to their protagonists as embodiments of the nation and its transformation, are quite distinct. For Gallegos' male protagonist in *Doña Bárbara* (1977[1929]) Santos Luzardo, the essence of the male civilizing impulse entails the domestication of wild spaces by setting up fences, thereby carving them into terrains of production: the formation of nation and manhood formation are one in the same. But in María Eugenia, the protagonist in de la Parra's epic *Ifigenia*, we find the female expatriate's stance to be contemplative and diminishing, rather than formative, of both the nation and herself as a woman. In that novel Nation is contemplated as gender and ethnicity in ports and urban barrios, in boudoirs and gardens.

Giocanda Belli's *La mujer habitada* registers a similar borrowing and departure from masculine epistemes. As in male narratives toward the end of the decade of the 1980s, Belli's account textualizes the revolutionary nation in the city – away from the masculine space of the mountain as home of the valorous guerrilla (124). Rather than affirming the New Man as a model of revolutionary subjectivity, however, Belli debates it through the introduction of indigenous, mestizo, and middle-class white women as social subjects who configure love, marriage, passion, and issues of reproduction into the new Nicaragua in formation.

One of the Rodríguez' central propositions is that processes of nation-formation are inscribed in the literary works she takes up through the figuring of land: as delimited, fenced in, battled over. In thinking of the nation as a delimited body of land, the distinction between mainland and island nations becomes important. True to her cumulative method, Rodríguez refers to this distinction repeatedly, never systematizing its significance, but rather insinuating it through references to its import: in the relation between national territory and questions of sovereignty and independence (2); or in the distinct ways continental or island writers historicize and inscribe moments of transition (53). Given that four of the five authors write about transitional moments in the national histories of islands, it is striking that Rodríguez casts mainland nation-formation as somehow prototypical of Neo-Positivist national longing, presenting the island cases as falling short of the civilizing processes reorganizing national lands on the mainland (23). We thus find the mainland implicitly established in male terms relative to the islands in Rodríguez' framework.

A distinction of particular significance among these novels of transition, Rodríguez tells us, "is their moment of enunciation" (53). And indeed Rodríguez' analysis is framed by a careful historicization of the moments of transition taken up the various authors. In contrast, however, she takes the writers' shared gender and ethnic positions ("[all] the representations of gender in this study, without exception, are signed by one social class and, with only one exception, by the same ethnicity" (53)), to be unproblematic bases of commonality, despite differences in their cultural and historical positions. Directly and indirectly, Rodríguez suggests that the cultural-national differences among these writers – who after all originate from and address the formation of nations with distinct colonial roots – do not constitute meaningful differences in their experiences of exclusion from masculine processes of nation-formation and its inscription, nor in their responses to that exclusion. This is a rather provocative implication that bears further exploration. Yet, one wonders whether her flattening of "the feminine" – as a politics, an aesthetics, and a social position – doesn't contradict an otherwise quite important historicizing impulse.

*House, Garden, Nation* will grip readers as much for the author's literary excursions as for her impassioned analysis, constructed through an unequivocally feminist lens and radical political commitments. From the opening of the narrative, the reader is offered a frame in which to situate both author and text: Rodríguez reveals her childhood fascination with nation-building novels and her identification with its (male) characters; confesses that as a university student she read these texts "under the two hegemonies ... [of] Marxism and Neopositivism (xiv); and reflects on the tragic denouement of

the Sandinista revolution in the election of a “woman of porcelain” representing the values of Neo-Liberal orders. More subtle, but no less compelling, is her shadow-presence in the analyses themselves; Rodríguez dwells on the angst of these women writers – all of whom write from positions of racial and class privilege – as they attempt to locate themselves in relation to those configurations. One is led to wonder whether Rodríguez might not be grappling with her own location, identity and purpose as a post-colonial woman of privilege, through the medium of her predecessors’ writings.

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