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The Power of Transgression: Rosario Castellanos and the Cycle of Womanhood

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Abstract

Feminist literary studies are innately transgressive, asking the reader to engage with ideologies that are antithetical to the systematically inequitable societies we live in. This transgression is based not only in the very process of analysis and academic excavation, but in the readings and delineations of the women-written work we consume. Mexican author Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974) engendered the epitome of societal infractions in her work: she wrote, honestly. To fully comprehend the measure of influence that Latin American women writers have demonstrated over the field of literary analysis is to look at the intersection of their identities, pushing beyond the discriminatory boundaries of white feminism in scholastic schools of thought. It is critical that traditional womanhood is examined through the lens of the first-person, in order to understand the whole trauma that the patriarchy enforces among women. This paper exhibits the powers of the first-person narrative truth, corroborated by Castellanos' dedication to the process of disinterring inbred patriarchal definitions of womanhood through the confrontation of uxorial, gestational, and maternal trauma. Castellanos' deeply personal writing – centering on “Culinary Lesson”, “Origin”, and “Speaking of Gabriel” – illustrates how narratives of the patriarchally-imprisoned woman are ones of forced consent, forced acquiescence, and forced obedience, while acknowledging the greater

schemes of emotional resonances – the vexation, the desperation, the resignation – that these female roles are quietly defined by.

Keywords: Translated Literature, World Literature, Latin American Literature, Feminism

It is an undeniable truth that the patriarchy expects authority and possession over the female body. This attempted ascendancy weaves threads of misogynistic dialogues and occurrences that are banal in the quotidian lives of women, while, paradoxically, instilling an incendiary summons to women authors; it creates a cross-narrative antithetical for many female-written texts that transgress against patriarchal institutions. Rosario Castellanos, a Mexican writer, professor, and diplomat, was no stranger to the complexities of womanhood. Drawing from her own life, including her tumultuous marriage, her difficult pregnancies, and the general ‘occupational hazards’ of being a woman, Castellanos wrote literature that was bold and angry. Her confessional style demonstrates how narratives of the patriarchally-imprisoned woman are ones of forced consent, juxtaposed against the emotional resonances – the vexation, the desperation, the resignation – by which these roles are quietly defined. In her short story “Culinary Lesson” and poems “Speaking of Gabriel” and “Origin”, Castellanos illustrates the female body as a place of nonconsensual commodification that has its own, often ignored, narrative truth. This textual authenticity engages with societal pressures and patriarchal objectifications in order to inhibit the emotional, physical, and mental trauma that the innate of cycle ‘traditional’ womanhood produces. Castellanos’ writings are deeply

entrenched in the realities of uxorial, gestational, and maternal trauma, and excavate, with a sense of coping, the circuitous effect that it has on women and the female body.

The patriarchally-defined traditional cycle of womanhood produces a version of female life that is ridden of any self-identity or autonomy. She floats from positionality to positionality, from a father's daughter to a husband's wife, from the patriarchy's incubator to a male child's mother. Castellanos developed her literature through her own lived experiences: "Everything she wrote . . . was an outgrowth of her own experience, her method of working her way through the many conflicts in her life. It served as a means of poetic unburdening" (Bonifaz 7). Situating Castellanos' texts into each stage of this cycle exhibits a larger framework that contextualizes the disinterment of trauma as the thematic focal point. Where do narrator and author intersect? When is autobiography fiction, and vice versa? The fragile and candid first-person narrative becomes not only a situational aid, but an intellectual necessity during times of trauma.

"Culinary Lesson" accompanies a newly-wed woman on her mission to cook a meal for her husband. Cerebral and sardonic, the unnamed protagonist queries the realities of her new feminized role in the domestic sphere. Coupled with the stereotypical uxorial duties of cooking and cleaning, she is aware of her oppression defined by paternal influence and matrimonial subjugation, *alongside* the realities of her former identity fighting for air: "My place is here. From the beginning of time it has been here. In the German proverb woman is synonymous with Küche, Kinder, Kirche" (40). By simultaneously enforcing and displacing this very idea of 'kitchen, children, church', Castellanos' establishes the convention – a identity-less

woman cooking a meal for her husband – and the transgression – this wife’s intense emotional and physical cognizance.

Thus, begins a prolonged series of metaphors that objectify and transcribe her existence: “On examining this cleanliness, such beauty . . . the hidden presence of sickness and death” (40). She is, externally, the “clean” societal ‘beauty’ that her husband expects her to be, but internally, she is conscious of the “death” of her former identity – an identity that was less defined by her propinquity to a patriarchal figure, though defined nonetheless. This “sickness”, then, is that domestic oppression, that constant feeling of suffocation. When commenting upon her surname, she articulates this again: “I lost my old name and am still not accustomed to the new one, which isn’t mine either” (43). *Either*. She flounders between identity and expectation, precariously balancing between given name and forced name, who she is and who she must be. This contradictory expectation is the female reality, and the brilliance of “Culinary Lesson” lies in how this very paradox is the chassis for the story: the buzzing brain of the protagonist *is* who she is, and the physical actions are who she must be: the demure, insipid, submissive housewife.

This incongruity expresses the internal-external paradigm of woman-written testimonials. What is Castellanos saying by not speaking *aloud*? What does the character do that denotes the physical entrapment that women are presumed to obey? Castellanos engages in a realm of self-reflexivity that scholar Catherine Ann Grant dissects through quoting philosopher Raymond Tallis: “The realm of knowledge is verbally organised [sic] and access to it is verbally mediated. The reality that any individual inhabits is a vast inverted pyramid of discourse poised on a tiny apex of experience” (31). Castellanos’ “apex of experience” reflects

her internal-external paradigm through the production of her own empirical knowledge and narrative truth; composed of knowledge and experience, elements historically reserved for male-narrative discourses, Castellanos' utilization of these components naturally infringe upon canonical patriarchal literature. By distilling the internal-external paradigm to its core, a reality arises: the internal entity is vital because it's forbidden to be external; furthermore, the internal is *valuable* because it defies tradition.

In "Culinary Lesson" the internal-external paradigm emerges in the extended metaphor that compares the feminine body to a piece of meat: "I open the refrigerator compartment that announces 'meat' and remove a package, unrecognizable beneath its mantle of ice . . . it's appearance, rigidly cold, and its color that is clear now that I have opened the package. Red, as if it were about to bleed" (Castellanos 41). This description is an analogous evocation: an image of the narrator that is as "unrecognizable" as it is familiar: frozen, unattached without; wounded, aching within. The story, then, is the inter-corporeal interaction of her two selves: the physical (the wife), and the mental and emotional (the woman): "The piece of meat, now that it's salted has muffled the scandal of its redness and is now more familiar, more tolerable" (42). *Now that I have rubbed salt in my wounds*, the protagonist suggests, *I am available for consumption*. This metaphor is capricious in its precise and unsettling nature: the objectification and ownership of women is akin to the purchasing, cooking, presenting, and eating of a piece of meat.

Moreover, the cooking process becomes a pacing mechanism relative to the unraveling of the woman's thoughts. Wifehood "burns" her, she is "shriveling up" (46), and laying "quietly now, true to [the] nature of a cadaver" (46). This narrative is the birth of her

marriage and the death of her former life and self. But it is in her recognition of the meat's resistance to expiry, that she continues to transgress: "Only at the tips does it persist in recalling its raw state . . . I don't know where all that smoke is coming from, since I turned off the oven ages ago" (47). The protagonist watches her body – the meat – burning alive – being cooked – from outside her physical being. Yet, she struggles to save the meat's original "raw state", the original selfhood. When considering that wifhood is ownership in name and body, questions of autonomy surface: where does wifhood begin and self-identity end? And how can those two singularities coincide? Self-reflexivity through the internal-external paradigm becomes the literary anchor: "I am not the reflection of an image in the glass; I am not destroyed by the turning off of a consciousness . . . I was not and I am" (42-43). *I am and I am not*. Castellanos questions the ideologies of self-hood in inequitable societal structures: this statement of existence is a statement of non-existence, the raw meat and the burned meat, the internal and the external. Where does the parameter live, if that internal-external paradigm supersedes the distinctions of fiction and non-fiction? The answer is in the in-between: the intersection of knowledge and experience, of narrative control and authorial control, of trauma and recovery, of the unfettered internal and the fettered external.

Bodily autonomy is the foundation of human rights, and "Culinary Lesson" suggests that the very sanctity of marriage violates the individuality that every person deserves to have sovereignty over. This is transparently conveyed in the marital expectations of sex, or, the beginning of the complete loss of the wife's autonomy: "Face up I bore not only my own weight but his as well on top of mine. The classical posture for lovemaking. And I moaned, from excitement, from pleasure. The classical moan. Myths, myths" (42). Not only does the phrase "I

moaned, from excitement, from pleasure” flare with the irony that underpins the protagonist’s voice, it plays into the patriarchal course of copulation. The woman is supposed to moan, to demonstrate that she is enjoying the process of a man coming to orgasm inside of her, without acknowledging her pleasure at all. Intercourse is the first push from wifedom to societal broodmare, which is one of the reasons why female masturbation is completely underrepresented in a patriarchal society – pleasure is deemed a male experience, removing women from the equation entirely. But in “Culinary Lesson”, the protagonist *does* acknowledge onanism as a womanly experience: “Before I was married I used to read things on the sly. Sweating with excitement and shame” (46). It is the term *shame* that it is most important to dissect in order to comprehend the societal sphere of opprobrium: that a woman’s body is the very thing of which she must be ashamed. This leads to patriarchal commodification of the female body because it undermines a woman’s autonomy. When a woman’s own society uses sexist measures to subvert an entire gender, the acknowledgment of masturbation in a narrative becomes a powerful statement of bodily re-appropriation. It is especially important when considering the complexities of pregnancy and the patriarchal pregnancy narrative: this is a protagonist who is not only pleasuring herself, but a woman who is pleasuring herself without the aid or desire of a man, or the desire to be impregnated.

Indubitably, the very nature of pregnancy is parasitical, and the necessity of this recognition engenders the framework that motherhood often equates to trauma. The term parasitical is defined by the ideas of exploitation and habitual, nonconsensual reliance. Castellanos, in a voice comparable to the protagonist’s in “Culinary Lesson,” explores the intensity of this traumatic gestational period and the simultaneous and ubiquitous female

dichotomy of the internal and the external parasite in her poem "Speaking of Gabriel": "Like all guests my son disturbed me / occupying a place that was mine / . . . / making me split each mouthful in two" (Castellanos, *Gabriel* 1-4). The words "making me," "was mine," and "occupying" illustrate the non-existent boundaries of this relationship, demonstrating that the speaker's pregnancy is intrinsically akin to the loss of her autonomy. The simple phrase "Like all guests" demonstrates that internal-external paradigm that is indicative of the autonomy-less experience of the woman, especially the wife and the pregnant woman. "Guests" becomes an ironic term, for these 'guests' are not welcome, and, like a pregnancy, are often overstaying their visitation, "occupying a place" that isn't theirs physically, but 'theirs' patriarchally. Scholar Nuala Finnegan suggests that it is the combination of the patriarchal mindset and societally-manufactured schemas that lead to the intensity of recognizing pregnancy for what it is: "patriarchal ideology . . . glorifies and glamorizes both pregnancy and motherhood. Thus, the inseminations and subsequent destruction of the female bodies that occurs with pregnancy . . . signify a destruction of innocence caused by patriarchal systems of power" (1015). The romanticization of trauma is fueled in that patriarchy by the abusers, not the victims, hence the exemplification of narrative truth in Castellanos's texts: they distribute not only an individual verity, but a societal one too.

Castellanos inscribes this brutal depiction of 'the miracle of life' to undermine the glamorized patriarchal gestational façade. In her very syntax this brutality deluges, for the language of control, of ownership, of commodifying the female body, does not quell as maturation occurs; instead, the parasitical presence becomes much more dangerous for the mother: "I felt him grow at my expense / rob my blood of its color" (Castellanos, *Gabriel* 6-7).

The act of stealing, of “robbing”, the life of the speaker proves the physical ramifications of pregnancy, but also implies the mental consequences that occur through the simultaneous unattainability of autonomy and the over-expectations of maternal domesticity. The speaker experiences the cyclical trauma of pregnancy and motherhood: the act of sex, which has long since been an act in male dominance and disregard of female pleasure in order to facilitate male lineage, as the protagonist of “Culinary Lesson” transcribes; the extent of gestation, of a woman’s body being overrun by a parasitical force which is considered a positive gift and duty by society, therefore disvaluing a woman’s potential concerns and anxieties about the pregnancy and about life post-pregnancy; the birth, a traumatic experience that leads to a “wound” (13) or “hemorrhage” (14) that is mental, physical, and emotional; and the combined experience of post-partum depression and the patriarchal supposition that a woman is a womb only, and therefore, must go through the process again and again. This cycle corroborates the societal idea that a woman’s only value is as a tool through which more men can be born, therefore refusing the validity of her trauma and the fundamental desire for her to own her body. In that, the feminine body loses its very form, its very infrastructure, because now the child has taken literally and figuratively from the mother without reciprocation. The body becomes fractured and unable to heal due to the ever-churning cycle: “The pregnant body is thus a site of disintegration and disgust that causes the women’s already fragile identities to collapse under the pressure” (Finnegan 1010). While the phrasing “fragile identities” undercuts the realities the toxic environment that a pregnant woman is placed in – their identities are not “fragile”, their ecosystems are virulent; it is not a matter of the woman being ‘strong enough’, but of society being increasingly misogynistic and pressurized – this quote does incorporate the

idea of the “disintegrated” body that a woman must rebuild in order to heal. But, as aforementioned, the nature of the patriarchal cycle of womanhood is not focused on the healthful development of the female body, but on the monetary gains of society.

“Speaking of Gabriel” ends in a dazed tonal change, where the fighting mother is no longer able to protect herself, no longer able to heal: “I remained open, manifest / to visitations, to wind, to presence” (Castellanos, *Gabriel* 17-18). The vernacular here demonstrates ways in which the female body is a place of consumption, nonconsensually, from external parasitical forces. The term “manifest” boldly implies the nature of appropriating a body of land and controlling it without any approbation. When looking at this term in relation to the ideology of ‘manifest destiny’, the commodification of the female body becomes that much more cemented, for it is the patriarchy who is usurping, controlling, and damaging the body. The tonal shift that implies a sense of abandonment indicates that the patriarchy has claimed the woman’s body, once more. The loss of the speaker’s voice, the sudden lack of intensity, the resigned nature of the words “I remained open” – a past tense verb that indicates that new infinite positionality – depict that ‘manifest destiny’ coming to fruition, and the inimical role of the patriarchy in childbirth.

The patriarchy becomes further embodied in Castellanos’ “Origin”, which picks up where “Speaking of Gabriel” left off: a woman, post-labor, dead, for her duty as a woman is, in the very basic theory of commodification, complete, since she has replaced her ‘useless’ body with the life of a newborn male, who will, presumably, grow into exactly whom the patriarchy lauds. It is imperative to discuss the peculiar framework and perspective of this poem: “I am growing on a woman’s corpse”, the poem begins, immediately stealing the first-person

narrative from the female figure (Castellanos, *Origin 1*). What makes this anomalous is that the very nature of Castellanos' work is confessional, it is a therapy, and for this poem to be from the perspective of the speaker's male child, who's just killed her in childbirth, is atypical. But the stripping of the mother's narrative truth exemplifies the way in which the patriarchy manifests the female body: not only has her life been taken away from her, but her voice, her story, her *words* have been stolen from her, too. In "Culinary Lesson" and "Speaking of Gabriel", the subjectivity is a narrative truth that is formulated through personal experiences that Castellanos relates to specifically. When looking at these texts through an individualistic lens, the scope becomes uncomfortably close to the confessional diary-like writing that institutes a level of therapeutic catharsis for both the author and the reader. Scholar Erin Gallo explores Castellanos' past in order to understand the intersection of the personal and the political: "In transferring her feelings and desires to the page, she [Castellanos] envisions the influence of literature on reality. In accessing her own personal experience, she is connecting to a larger political and public denunciation that she can intellectualize even if she can't yet practice it" (304). It is writing that unfetters Castellanos, allowing for her texts to live within that ubiquitous internal (personal) and external ("political and public") paradigm while simultaneously freeing Castellanos and remarking on the patriarchal prison in which she is societally trapped.

The simple phrase "I am" compromises the entirety of the personal by overwhelmingly giving voice to that political majority (Castellanos, *Origin 1*). Moreover, it fascinatingly parallels a self-reflexive passage in "Culinary Lesson": "I am not the dream that dreams, that dreams, that dreams; I am not the reflection of an image in the glass; I am not

destroyed by the turning off of a consciousness . . . I was not and I am” (Castellanos, *Culinary* 42-43). The repetition of the phrase “I am” and, opposingly, “I am not” gives life to the narrative being; it is a statement of existence. And yet, this phrase becomes appropriated by the patriarchy in “Origin”, stripping away the existence of this woman. This poem, thus, grapples with the sudden loss of her voice, the sudden disregard of her body, the death of her former self as soon as the child is born. The “corpse” can be viewed through a literal lens – that the mother has actually died in childbirth – or a figurative one, reminiscent of the line “the hidden presence of sickness and death” from “Culinary Lesson” (*Culinary*, 40). The ways in which these two texts interact exhibit the cyclical, the suffocating, nature of womanhood. The first stanza of this poem substantiates that sense of suffocation through the child’s vocabulary: “my roots wrap themselves around her bones / and from her disfigured heart / a stalk emerges vertical and tough” (Castellanos, *Origin* 2-4). The “roots”, his past, his history, are precisely what continue to abuse the mother, for now those narratives are irrelevant compared to his oncoming masculine endeavors. Her “disfigured heart” is the internal version of the grotesque that the female body becomes when pregnant: suddenly, the whole body, post-pregnancy, is monstrous, is abnormal. This stalk, this young man, rises from her corpse with a Christ-like physicality – “a stalk emerges vertical” – begetting an image of the crucifix. And the term “tough” conveys the patriarchally masculine identity that the child has already developed.

The usage of “I” then becomes muddled as the patriarchy evolves into its own existence separate from the child: “From the being of an unborn child: / from her womb cut down before the harvest / I rise stubborn, definitive / brutal as a tombstone” (5-8). The owner of “I” becomes vague, for now it has been displaced from both the child and the mother. This

displacement becomes the basis for the patriarchy's voice: it is that seizure of the personal voice that corroborates the patriarchy's danger toward both woman and man. The child becomes "unborn", becomes a fetal body that is not able to use that masculine privilege against the patriarchy; the mother is reduced to a "womb" that is "cut down" before its prime, before it has delivered all desired male children, and is a product, a commodity harvested. "I rise" is a political phrasing, whose syntax demonstrates the crumbling of the other expendable parts of the conquered female body. The patriarchy, then, further exhibits its false sympathy, "with the stony sadness of the funeral angel / who hides a tearless face between his hands" (9-10). The excess of religious imagery both monumentalizes the patriarchy and remarks upon its societal construction of anti-non-white-cis-male infrastructures. The "funeral angel" attends this service only because he must, he has a "stony sadness" that underpins the very politics of toxic masculinity that permeate patriarchal societies, and, in tandem, is "tearless" – another typical masculine attribute – but is "hiding" that fact from those who are truly grieving. Castellanos uses this poem to question the very figures of that political, that external, scaffolding. In that, the stolen narrative voice also uncovers how detrimental the patriarchy is. This poem becomes therapeutic in its change of perspective, because Castellanos is able to reframe and interact with the system that shackles her while still emoting about the personal aspect of gestational and maternal life: "The author is the speaking, full, self-present subject producing the text from her own knowledge of the world and she is the guarantee of its truth" (Grant 32). This level of self-reflexivity is what makes Castellanos' work imperial to the understanding of anti-patriarchal literature, for it is paramount for that "self-present subject" to intersect with the wider scheme of society. In that, "Origin" has a duality that represents all forces in the

schematic triangle of this stage of womanhood: the fetus, the mother, and the society. Thus, this poem is the embodiment of the internal-external paradigm for it gives voices – silenced (the mother) or vocalized (the male child, the patriarchy) – to each participant, while reaching through that societal vortex to distribute Castellanos’ classic therapeutic bibliophilic narratives.

Castellanos’ commitment to a biographical physicality sanctions a larger dialogue regarding women-written literature. She employs “Culinary Lesson” as a stepping stone toward a broader understanding of the traditional cycle of womanhood. Intuitive self-reflexivity is imperial to Castellanos’ work and the construction of anti-patriarchal literature, as engendering textual embodiments of the internal-external paradigm denounces the vocalized – the male, the patriarchy – while empowering the silenced – the woman, the wife, the mother.

Castellanos’ literature transgresses against idealisms of the male canon by forging a corpus of work that memorializes the narrative woman and the traumas she fathoms, confronts, and heals.

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