

Magic and Gender in Celia del Palacio's Novel *Las mujeres de la tormenta*

By

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Abstract

This article focuses on a review of the role of magic as a means to fight against gender inequality, which will be analyzed particularly through a literary text—Las mujeres de la tormenta (Women of the Storm), a novel by Celia del Palacio, which tells the history of abuse of female slaves in Mexico since the 15th century until present. This topic was analyzed by using the concepts of 'strategy' and 'tactic' as described in theoretical work by Michel de Certeau. The analysis revealed a historical and continued abuse of female slaves by dominant classes, as well as continued 'strategies' of dominance, control and exploitation of female slaves. However, simultaneous 'tactics' used by female slaves to survive adverse conditions are presented. To conclude, an explanation of how magic has been a tactic and occasionally underground strategies have been used—not only by female slaves but also by every woman living in similar conditions—is provided.

Keywords: Gender, discrimination, magic, literature

1. Introduction

Although magic has consistently appeared in literature, even occasionally as a form of resistance of oppressed groups, it is not common to find it in relation to the fight against gender inequality as it is understood nowadays. However, the increasing complexity involving this issue and relevant advances in gender studies have made it possible to realize that different means are being increasingly used against injustice, including witchcraft and literature itself. Thus, below is an analysis of *Las mujeres de la tormenta* (2012), a novel by Mexican writer Celia del Palacio.

The work mentioned above is divided into ten chapters, five of which are dedicated to describing the violence, discrimination and abuse to which Black and Mulatto women have been consistently subjected since the 16th century—when they began to arrive to New Spain from Africa in the context of slave trade—until last century. The other five sections prove that this dreadful treatment is still in place today, but current victims in this account are migrant women, and the activist women who help and protect them. This work also focuses on tactics that throughout history women have brought into play to resist the forces and characters oppressing and subjugating them. One tactic is precisely the use of witchcraft.

2. Method

This analysis will be conducted based on the concepts of 'strategy' and 'tactic' as defined by Michel de Certeau (2000):

I call 'strategy' the calculus of force relationships enabled from the moment subjects of will and power become susceptible to isolation from an 'environment'. Strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as a basis for managing relations with an exterior distinct from it. Political, economic and scientific rationality is constructed under this strategic model.

In contrast, I call 'tactic' a calculus which cannot count on a proper localization, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other (pages xlix-l).

Both notions are opposed but at the same time are part of a whole associated with the powerful and the weak. They can be applied accurately to facts in del Palacio's novel, which are described from a historical perspective too.

The first three centuries of the simultaneous historical plot through which *Las mujeres de la tormenta* navigates are set during the Viceroyalty period of New Spain, when powerful institutions were established in the Americas society and land, replicating those of the mother country. That is, a monarchical state, a ubiquitous ecclesiastical apparatus and dominant social groups, which, together, retained power fiercely. New Spanish population, under the yoke of oppressive, monolithic powers, was a victim to different extents of its dictatorial nature and the various ways of injustice resulting from them. But among the most susceptible social groups were Black female slaves who were brought to New Spain by Portuguese merchants to be sold as animals or objects to the highest bidder. These slaves became property, and as with any other belonging, buyers treated or used them at will, arguing that they should make their money worthwhile.

Clearly, slave trade was one of many strategies used by socially dominant groups to exert and accumulate political, economic and social power, which pervaded every aspect of life of the subjugated, cancelling their individuality and subjecting them to their owner's content and needs, including those of a sexual kind. Black female slaves and their Mulatto offspring were practically defenseless, and del Palacio's novel is ripe with accounts of this situation. For instance, a witch's daughter is sexually harassed by master don Juan de Piñera, who sells her little daughter and sends her husband to San Juan de Ulúa to work as a stevedore of mercury—a work where he will get poisoned and eventually perish—with the purpose of abusing the young lady more easily, day and night (cf. p. 32).

Thus, the abused woman uses a magic knife to murder the master in an unexpected and sudden act, during an exceptionally propitious opportunity seized precisely in the Piñera's power space, fully corresponding to what de Certeau explains about tactics (2000: 43).

However, abuse does not recede with the passing of the centuries. Celia del Palacio's novel offers an archetypical example of abuse stories. For instance, Manuel de Olvera, a rich sugar mill owner, targets one of the slaves he owns as the object of his sexual desire. This slave, who happens to be the mother of La Mulata de Córdoba (the Mulatto lady from Córdoba)—a famous witch of the 18th century—is abused as young as 15 years old, since "Young flesh worked miracles for the old man's health, who lived longer than expected" (p. 143).

Sexual abuse by owners was commonly suffered by female slaves. It was not seen as an offense but, as Aguirre Beltrán (1994) points out, "Masters who constantly communicated with their slaves went on to consider that using them as sexual objects was lawful" (p. 63). Moreover, owners of Black and Mulatto female slaves usually acted as procurers, forcing the youngest and prettiest into prostitution. These women used to be sent to "work naked to earn their wage [...], which they would then bring to their masters" (p. 65). Concurrently, masters cleared their conscience and avoided conflict with religious authorities by spreading the myth about "the debauchery and dissolution of the African woman", which in the end worked out quite well. Thus, sexual abuse was not considered a sin or a crime by either church or consciences. And it was not punishable by law, although masters were advised to dress their female slaves "in a demure and modest way" to avoid scandal (Aguirre, 1994: 65).

The sexual aspect of female slave and Mulatto women exploitation was not the only outstandingly degrading extreme to which exploitation was carried. For instance, when her master died, the Mulatto

lady from Córdoba's mother was freed in return for the sexual services offered, but nonetheless she then had to work in the field and make candies during the night to sell them and support her daughter (cf. p. 147). Naturally, "sugar harvest work had taken its toll on her health: she had bleeding and calloused hands due to cutting the cane, and stooped over although she was not even 30 years old" (del Palacio, 2012:147). To sum up, as stated by Vitale (1981: 3), during the late 18th century, Black and Mulatto female slaves "were exploited not only sexually, but also financially. Never can the total surplus value provided by these women's work to the original capital accumulation fund worldwide be estimated."

The "tactics" to which Black and Mulatto women resorted in those conditions were different, but their outreach was very limited. However, witches of the lineage described in the novel were strong, powerful and essentially different from ordinary women of color. One of the best examples is the Countess of Malibrán, a seasoned witch who uses her powerful magic to marry a wealthy man, meaning she can thus benefit from having a space of her own where she can put some strategies into practice. For instance, "[she] seduced men at will, and when one recognized her, she didn't hesitate to kill him with her dagger" (del Palacio, 2012: 69); then, the blood shed by that weapon "could be used for potions or ointments" (p. 70). This is the come back to the masters for what they did with their female slaves. The character manages to achieve this thanks to her married status, which improves her economic and social status too and, having a place of her own, she can display her magic "strategies" and realize every single one of her wishes, including helping her people. To summarize, she manages to subvert the strategy-tactic relationship, since the former is reserved to those in power.

The end of the colonial era does not mean the end of violations of women's rights. To show this, Celia del Palacio's novel introduces a prominent historical character, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, a nineteenth-century president of the Mexican Republic infamous for his weaknesses, including excessive interest in women. In the novel, he is caught having affairs with a Mulatto housemaid, whom he can use and discard uneventfully, despite the tactic to which the Mulatto woman resorts—magic.

In the early 20th century, abuse and violence toward women—not specifically slaves of color—was still prevalent despite rapid social change occurring during this period. The novel shows this through the story of a young wealthy woman, Anastasia, an exemplary victim of "collateral damages" endured by middle-class women, the wives of wealthy merchants from Veracruz, and caused by a post-revolution event (Juárez, 2010), which deeply affects their personal, family and social life. When their economic status dramatically changes, their social status follows, rendering them easy prey to the greed of powerful merchants that survived the politic conflict.

Then again magic takes over to achieve justice and restore the balance. Lorenza, a powerful *nahualli*, performs a complex ritual to re-establish order, and young Anastasia recovers her inheritance.

During the very 21st century, despite positive changes in society, women's situation, especially in more vulnerable environments, is still characterized by submission and abuse, poignantly exacerbated among female human beings left drifting by global migratory movements, as depicted in del Palacio's novel. The birth of a new group of vulnerable women is announced alarmingly: activists that help and advocate protection for migrant women. The novel denounces this situation by portraying the story of a young lady from Veracruz, state with excessive threats to activists. Descendent of witchcraft lineage, Selene is a member of an aid organization for female immigrants. Along with her group, she uses magic as a tactic to seek justice, but is murdered regardless her and her group's abilities at the hands of powerful people that have control over immigrant trafficking, who also resort to magic not as a tactic, but as a criminal strategy.

A report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2009-2010) shows that "Because of the discrimination and violent conditions affecting immigrants in Mexico, advocates of human rights for

immigrants are forced to do their job in an adverse environment. This often has a direct impact on advocates' life, bodily integrity, freedom, safety, and reputation" (p. 111).

3. Discussion

Many authors who have addressed or address directly or indirectly the topic of this novel have a common belief that witchcraft is a form of resistance or, as called above, a "tactic" against oppressive forces, which has been implemented generally by oppressed groups in America during the colonial period. The great specialist in Negritude during the New Spanish colonial era, Aguirre Beltrán (1987) asserts that the social status of Indians and Mestizos led them "hand in hand with magic, to clandestinely and rebellion against the dominant group's system of values" (169). However, magic is still considered an illusory and inefficient tool.

For their part, both Vitale (1981) and Naranjo (2011) suggest that witchcraft was practiced by Black women as a way to resist oppression. Naranjo declares this in relation to the Black population in the New Kingdom of Granada (now Colombia). His study demonstrates how the treatment of Black women was invariably marked by the same characteristics, the ways in which they responded being similar too.

Blázquez(1981) and Velázquez Gutiérrez (2006), meanwhile, argue that magic practices were utilized sometimes to remedy or compensate for material injustices and others to solve love conflicts, attain a specific social power, and ultimately "to create allegiances as a form of resistance to subjugation and ill-treatment, [but] also, as a cultural manifestation that reproduced interaction with other groups in a new environment" (Velázquez Gutiérrez, 2006: 246).

Deeds's (2002) study on witchcraft in New Biscay introduces us to the world of Mulatto women in what today is the northern border, whose social environment was very different from the one in Veracruz. However, women's tactics were similar, as well as the appropriation of male spaces, intended to subvert the patriarchal order. The main tactic consisted in assimilating prevailing male patterns through the power bestowed by witchcraft practice (cf. Deeds online). Now, unlike witches of lineage as described in *Las mujeres de la tormenta*, Mulatto women from New Biscay were not successful in achieving a dominant space of their own—and thus it is appropriate to talk about efficient "tactics", which were used only during a period of time—and in the end a very strong feeling of guilt leads them to turn themselves in to the Inquisition. By contrast, in del Palacio's novel, nothing of the like happens: if women end up in the jails of the Inquisition, they escape.

4. Conclusions

Magic and literature meet in *Las mujeres de la tormenta* to offer the reader a panoramic view of the ongoing violence, abuse, and discrimination experienced by Black and Mulatto women in Veracruz, as well as the ways they have used magic as a "tactic" and "strategy" to face oppression and alleviate the difficult life conditions imposed on them by the system.

It should be noted, however, that literature in turn plays the role of a useful "tactic" to denounce gender issues and raise awareness about the nuances of that aspect of human existence, the roughness and tragedies of which have not been softened or invoked respectively over the years.

Clearly, literature involves a special "tactic": originating from the artistic dimension, it either gently forges its way or violently storms into reality through its complex aesthetic components. This allows it to spread, more freely and efficiently than other media or formats, a warning and denunciation message, which sometimes even goes unnoticed by the very denounced actors.

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