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The Strategic Discursive Consciousness Of Latin American Feminine Writing

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> In the text of many Latin American women writers, the Word is a space for women's self-representation, a new territory to map their self defined image, to sign with their own voice' (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 210-11).

Abstract: This article attempts to offer an overview of the socio-historical context that has shaped the voice of the Latin American woman writer. It offers an exposure of feminine literary discourses, which are of great relevance to understand the 'matriheritage of founding discourses'[2], revealing the rich textual examples of a wide range of women writers in Latin America, from those very well-established to the lesser known and forgotten. It is in the recent past that women writers gained recognition, filling a vacuum created by their exclusion, allowing the exploration of the transgressive and revolutionary essence of their writings. All these women and their work represent a 'network of relationships' which reveal 'the strategic discursive consciousness' of Latin American women writers.

Keywords: Literature; Latin America; woman writer; strategic discourse.

The female writer has been largely absent from the literary cannon with the exception of a few isolated examples.[3] (Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, in Bassnett, 1990, p. 104-5). It is in the recent past that women writers gained recognition, filling a vacuum created by their exclusion, allowing the exploration of the transgressive and revolutionary essence of their writings. All these women and their work represent a 'network of

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[2] Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz defines the 'matriheritage of founding discourses' as a diversity of strategies that make the gendered voice and perspective the focal point of most Latin American women writers. (Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, '" I will be a scandal in your boat": Women poets and he tradition', in Bassnett:1990, p.104-5).
[3] Luis Sanz de Medrano in his 1989 Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana does not mention any women writers in his long index of writers in the last one hundred years' (Mentioned by Medeiros-Lichem, 1999 110)

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relationships' which reveal 'the strategic discursive consciousness' of Latin American women writers. (Diaz-Diocaretz, "'I Will Be a Scandal in Your Boat': Women Poets and the Tradition," in Bassnett (ed.), 1990, p. 91-92.). These women are bonded by their common desire to sensitize their audience to "the voices of the silenced, of the censured, of domestic and political violence, of women's private and public space" (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 3).[4] Their written text was designed to awaken awareness and prevent attempts at concealment of their cultural conditioning as Other. Luisa Valenzuela offers an eloquent description of the feminine creative act of writing: 'Escribimos para descubrir, para develar, pero también para señalar aquello que por comodidad preferimos olvidar'. [We write in order to discover, to disclose, and also to point out that which is easier to forget]. (Valenzuela, 1986, p. 81).

Open forms of feminine expression were precluded during the nineteenth century and for many women the early written word represented a medium of escapism and a means to liberate themselves. Most of these writers came from the elite classes; however the only option for the vast majority was to conform. Nonetheless, some exceptional women confronted the repressive societal norms (Pastor, 1995). The importance of writing as a subversive vehicle is emphasized when we consider that many women writers were victimized because of their "sin" of writing. The woman writer had to challenge the image of 'monster' that she herself represented to the patriarchal order, since 'for a woman to attempt the pen was monstrous and presumptuous.' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 32).

Most women in patriarchal culture must have experienced their gender 'as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy.' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 50). In spite of having been successful writers during their life, they suffered much discrimination in their male-dominated world. Even earlier women writers 'challenged

[4] The term 'voice' is used 'as a trans-individual expression of the cultural, social and political circumstances and interpret the feminine voice as the result of a dialogical interaction between the forces of patriarchy , the monological voice that has dominated within literature, and the submerged and silenced voices of the Other—of women or the marginalized—those previously excluded from the territory of the Word'. (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 204).

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patriarchal norms and saw self-knowledge as the stepping stone towards expressing and consolidating a feminine voice' (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 23). Overall, they were advocates for their own rights, as women, without any difference in class or race. As Victoria Ocampo states: 'privileges of fortune do not change at all the injustices to which women [are] subjected.' (mentioned in Jehenson, 1995, p. 33)

Before the emergence and effect of the late nineteenth-century's social movement, 'a transnational, often multilingual network of print culture blossomed among elite and educated women of America and Europe'[5] (Bergman, 1990, p. 174). This represented a threat to patriarchal ideologies as it meant women producing in the public arena, making visible women's unacceptable conditions. As Lanser notes, traditionally, "gendered conventions of public voice and of narrative self-reference served important roles in regulating women's access to discursive authority" (1992, p.34). The impact of the print culture during this period provided infinitely greater possibilities to gain an audience among the growing elite classes of women in America and Europe.[6] (Bergman, 1990, p. 174).

The standard of education available to women proved to be a limiting factor as the potential readers able to gain access to literature were restricted to the middle and upper classes, also restricting the forms of literature they were allowed to read, hence the media these women could access. Although literacy was poor, by the mid-nineteenth century reading was beginning to gain ground. The increase of female readers awoke their consciousness to the unacceptable situation of their sex in culture and encouraged the

[5] For instance, Cuban Gómez de Avellaneda , who lived between Cuban and Spain, published the *Album del Bello Sexo* in Spain in 1840s and the *Album Cubano de lo Bueno y lo Bello* in Havana in 1860s. Some of these publications, mainly edited by men were devoted to women's interests such as serialized novels, fashion, etc. But there were also periodicals edited by women, 'devoted principally to demands by female emancipation and a voice in national debate'. (Bergman, 1999, p. 175).

[6] Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who lived between Cuban and Spain, was an enlightened example. She published the *Album del Bello Sexo* in Spain in 1840s and the *Album Cubano de lo Bueno y lo Bello* in Havana in 1860s, including issues of women's interests such as serialized novels, fashion, poems. Nonetheless these publications were mainly designed to address women's emancipation.

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creation of a solidarious but individual women's voice, or also called a 'matriheritage of founding discourses' (Diaz-Diocaretz, in Bassnett, 1990, p. 92).

The proliferation of printed 'literature for women' led to several basic types: moral and religious; educational but also recreational, and 'escapist literature'.[7]The latter revealing the female stereotypes of the period and the passive roles women had in society.[8] In addition, poetry— the traditionally acceptable feminine genre—was a path, not only open to women but an avenue for self-expression. Pedro Henriquez Ureña notes: '[…] with very few exceptions, women [were] absent from the abundant literary movement of the last decades of the [nineteenth] century' (Henríquez Ureña, 1964. p. 183). However poetry became a 'profoundly subversive activity', a focal point in women's writing to combat the oppressive role imposed on them in patriarchal society. In Alejandra Pizarnik's words: 'La poesía es el lugar donde todo sucede. A semejanza del amor, del humor, el suicidio y de todo acto profundamente subversivo, la poesía se desentiende de lo que no es su libertad o su verdad' ['The poem is a place where anything can happen. Like love, laughter and suicide, it is a profoundly subversive activity and poetry has nothing to do with its freedom or its truth.'] (Pizarnik 'El poeta y su poema', 1968).

The early written word represented a medium of escapism and a means to liberate themselves. Most of these writers came from the elite classes, however the only option for the vast majority was to conform. Nonetheless, some exceptional women confronted the repressive societal norms. Unquestionably most women writers attempted to create a language that could express the reality, the obstructive and repressive yoke that they suffered in their culture. Their voice acquired an authoritative space when strategically confronting the dominant powers and symbolic discourse, being compelled to adopt 'the use of discursive strategies to inscribe the language of the forbidden, of the repressed, or

[7] Each of these forms of literature was available in magazines and journals and, of course, novels.
[8] These conformist texts, in Jehenson's view 'focus on copying mechanisms rather than on specific strategies for change' (Jehenson, 1990, p. 23).

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in other words, of women's experience.' (Lanser, 1992, p. 6). This (feminine) writing emerged as a sophisticated and strategic system of words; in Pizarnik's terms, 'signs' that 'hint at things, [that] suggest things.' (*Algunas claves de Alejandra Pizarnik* interview with Martha I. Moia, 1967 in Bassnett, 1990). Medeiros-Lichem refers to the written 'word' as a powerful tool for empowering the feminine: 'In the text of many Latin American women writers, the Word is a space for women's self-representation, a new territory to map their self-defined image, to sign with their own voice'. (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 210-11).

This strategic usage of the written word emerged as 'a particular mode of appropriation and transformation of reality, of the language to express and construtct it, and of the form of structuring the text' (Quoted from Sara Sefchovich, 1985, p. 15.). ['un modo particular de apropiación y transformación de la realidad, del lenguaje para expresarla y construirla del modo de estructuración de un texto']. In agreement with this, Jean Franco and Francine Masiello emphasize that feminine activity is 'a path to construct power and to transform the process of enunciation, to create anew definition of womanhood and of feminine discourse'. (Franco, 42). Similarly, Irigaray proposes a feminine space "as a different mode of enunciation, based on the creation of a language that breaks away that "disturbs" the univocal phallocratic conception of truth" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 78). These theoretical observations seem to echo the Latin American woman voice. As Luisa Valenzuela observes**,** this writing attempts to articulate a 'lenguaje hémbrico'—a feminine language that would create a venire of conformity and social compliance while evading the rigid censorship of women's appropriation of the pen, which dictates 'what they are supposed to do with their bodies, and say with their mouths'. (in Medeiros –Lichem, 1999, p.160).

In her attempt to articulate her authentic (feminine) voice, the woman writer was trapped between a censorious patriarchal society and her need, as a woman, to become a speaking subject in her own right. Gilbert and Gubar explain how the woman author was forced to recur to a complex use of metaphors, not only to reflect, but also to challenge

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the misogynist structure of Western culture. Thus, the woman writer has to be feminine whilst denying her femininity; she creates a woman's world within her novels, but, at the same time, rejects that world by the very act of 'becoming' a novelist—by taking up the pen, an object to which Gilbert and Gubar refer as the 'metaphorical penis' – an essentially defined male 'tool' which has been considered not only inappropriate but also alien to women. [9] The fiction of many female writers can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story. An eloquent example is Clarice Lispector's *The passion according to G.H., which* contains a 'double-voice', 'an anticlimactic reverse discourse of truth and beauty that inscribes a feminine voice liberated from fear' (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 84).

According to Gilbert and Gubar: 'Lacking the pen/penis which would enable [women] similarly to refute one fiction by another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely [...] by male expectations and designs', (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 12.). Although many Latin American feminine texts use several different types of characterisation to portray the position of women in patriarchal culture, they also contain portrayals of frustrated wives, fallen women versus virginal women, among others, creating different forms of women's oppression. However, as Toril Moi states. 'To study "images of women" in fiction is equivalent to studying *false* images of women in fiction written by both sexes. [...] Writing is seen as a more or less faithful *reproduction* of an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access, and which therefore enables us to criticise the author on the grounds that he or she has created an *incorrect* model of the reality we somehow all know. (Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 44-45) In Gilbert and Gubar's observations, these false images of women are embodied in the constructs of the 'angel

[9] Gilbert and Gubar, p. 8. 'Lacking the pen/penis which would enable [women] similarly to refute one fiction by another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely [...] by male expectations and designs' ([9]Gilbert and Gubar, p.12).

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in the house' and the 'madwoman in the attic'. 'Such stereotypes have become fixed in the characterization of both female and male writers and that it is a constant battle for women writers to create alternative definitions of women' (Pastor, 2003, p. 23).

Nonetheless, the situation has changed dramatically in recent decades and there exists a considerable influential corpus of women writers who have succeeded in making their voices heard in the public space. By deconstructing the patriarchal restrictions of the (feminine) voice, authors such as Luisa Valenzuela have questioned the traditional feminine representations in the dichotomy of monster/beauty or femme fatale/virgin, and hence privileged the culturally negative images of the woman as it. Enlightening examples are her essays *Mis brujas favoritas* and *La mala palabra*. This was a departing point towards a more overt transgression of the repressive cultural norms and the beginning of self-definition for women writers, re-constructing their own feminine identity, even to the degree of voicing and celebrating their own desires and bodies. Luisa Valenzuela's usage of language gives voice to 'the unrepresented desires of female eroticism' within a context of political repression and violence in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s.

This evolution of female expression provided an alternative discursive proposal, as Francine Masiello points out 'a language of resistance', which is 'to be found in association with other periphery groups to confront power and generate a place from where to speak'. (Masiello, 1986: 54) and whose reader belongs to a contemporary reality which has not internalized the symbolic patriarchal ideology. (Guerra, 1979, p. 35 Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 32). Ultimately, women writers were compelled to hide their authentic feminine voice, limiting their agency to the unreal and restrictive symbolic role that society had imposed on them. Their own marginality as women allowed them to produce anti-marginal discourses, which are textually distinct from other anti-marginal narratives written by male authors. The personal tragedy of the marginalized highlights the collective tragedy of the female sex (See Picón Garfield, 1993, p. 54). Sara Castro-Klarén argues that the Latin American woman faces discrimination on two fronts: the

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cultural repression of women and racial disadvantage: 'porque es mujer y porque es mestiza' [because she is a woman and because she is of mixed race] (in González y Ortega, 1985, p. 43). However this is an arguable view, since it should not be overlooked that the majority of the Latin American women writers emerge from a classist and European cultural origin. It is evident that some of these writers show genuine concern for the marginalized, though they resort to the anti-marginal discourse to establish an analogy with the position of women's relegation, highlighting their main concern, which is feminist in intent.

Strategically, some writers succeeded in establishing a link between their social position in the margins and other marginalized groups. The theme of marginalization has been seen as a powerful political tool for women writers, as they can articulate the voice of the marginalized and the difference between the culturally defined dominant and the Other. As Debra Castillo states: 'Marginality is a tool for both marking and masking very real differences, as well as for creating false differences out of the cultural, economic, philosophical, and ideological exigencies of an antagonistic politics.' (Castillo, 1992, p. 61). Many of the texts by Elena Poniatowska, Laura Valenzuela, Rosario Castellanos, even nineteenth-century Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, seem to reveal an affiliation of women with the marginalized and oppressed, thus inscribing the discourse of the margins into the literary canon**.** In her novel *Sab* resorts to the anti-slavery theme simply to establish an analogy between the position of women and slaves, thus highlighting her main concern, which is feminist in intent; Mexican journalist and writer of fiction, Elena Poniatowska blends her feminist ideology with the voices of the marginalized, as it can be seen in her critical texts 'Literature and women in Latin America' and her novel *Hasta no verte Jesus mío; A*rgentinian Luisa Valenzuela's collection of short stories, *Cambio de armas* deals with the issue of oppression under patriarchy and political power; Laura Restrepo also explores the relationship between race and class; her novel *La novia oscura* encapsulates the extreme marginalization and exploitation of the Indians, creating a counter discourse that includes class, race and

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gender; Chilean Gabriela Mistral and Mexican Rosario Castellanos addressed the oppression and marginalization of indigenous people simultaneously with their feminist agenda. Castellanos's novel Baún Canán gives voice to the Other Indians to reveal the lack of dialogue between them and the dominant Ladinos, thus proposing "a plural ideology of voices that interact dialogically in a tense terrain o reversing master/slave relations" (Medeiros Lichem,1999, p. 87). Edward Said refers to this relationship as 'communities of interpretation'. (Said, 1985, p. 4). Many voices in the feminist literary movement, attempted the unthinkable, to build the foundations of a more egalitarian society, 'engaged in a 'fight for legislation and reform in order that they might take up their rightful and 'equal' places in the linear (masculine) time of project and history' (Kristeva, 1986, p. 193).

Sara Castro-Klarén argues that the Latin American woman faces discrimination on two fronts: the cultural repression of women and racial disadvantage: 'porque es mujer y porque es mestiza' (in González y Ortega, 1985, p. 43). However, this is an arguable view, since it should not be overlooked that the majority of the Latin American women writers emerge from a classist and European cultural origin. From their gender-oriented works, their own marginality as women allowed them to produce anti-marginal discourses, which are textually distinct from other anti-marginal narratives written by male authors. The personal tragedy of the marginalized highlights the collective tragedy of the female sex. (See Picón Garfield, 1993, p. 54). It is evident that some of these writers show genuine concern for the marginalized, though they resort to the anti-marginal discourse to establish an analogy with the position of women's relegation, highlighting her main concern, which is feminist in intent.

It was not until the second half of the last century that Latin America has witnessed an emerging and influential corpus of women writers who have undoubtedly left an authoritative legacy through their literature. It is essential for women to become a unified force, to discover new ways of organization, new forms of resistance and challenges, questioning the patriarchal traditions that have excluded them. (Fuss, 1989, 74-75).

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Feminine writing was awakening social consciousness in Latin America destabilizing the traditional foundations of dominant literature and redefining the cultural role of women with a Latin American uniqueness. According to Medeiros Lichem:

> In a new culture of inclusion, a voice is granted to those who come in from the margins. We have lived the end of colonialism of ideological and military dictatorships, and—relatively—of patriarchy. Otherness, once dreaded is now recognized as an asset (Medeiros Lichem, 1999, p. viii).

Throughout the twentieth century until present, there has been a degree of marginalization of women's writing despite their notable emergence. Many of their works remain unread or have limited critical acclaim. From the 1980s onwards the Latin American woman writer seems to have severed the ties with the paradigms of textual tradition, fashioning new modes of feminine expression. Medeiros-Lichem notes that although initially this generation of writers is inspired by the Anglo-American and French Feminist ethos, a contemporary feminist literary debate broke out and designed the main preoccupations of the Latin American critical discourse. (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 54)

It can be concluded that after all these centuries of developing strategic literary techniques in order to express their own subjectivity, but at the same, attempting to avoid social punishment for their transgressive attempt to take up the pen— women writers now assume their marginalized role in history and mark a significant divorce from the traditional narrative and phallocentric norms. Furthermore, they have awakened to a different vision of reality, and have overcome the restriction of patriarchal discourse. In contrast with earlier texts, women authors are addressing their text to readers who had not 'internalized the values of the dominant masculine ideology' (Guerra, 1979, p. 35).

Nonetheless, the arduous project of the feminist writer continues to be an ongoing process, since feminism, as Asunción Lavrín points out, has had a poor reception in Latin American societies as a whole: 'In the past—and perhaps even today—feminism in Latin America has not always been a popular cause. Deprecated by some intellectuals—male

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and female—it has received a tepid or outright cold reception among the majority of the population. […] The tension resulting from the desire to gain rights while at the same time preserving femininity and respectability is a constant topic in the works of male and female writers, feminist and antifeminist, and one that offers fascinating implications for cultural history' (Lavrín, 1978, p. 320).

All in all, women authors rose above the deafening silence imposed upon them and above all else, defined a literature of their own. Now there exists a substantial, influential body of women writers who have succeeded in making their voices heard in the public space. Their writing, or better their language, constitutes a means of inscribing a women's perspective as a central element to understand Latin American literature. In the words of Medeiros-Lichem: "The feminine voice in Latin America is alive and broadly represented through a community of writers who have explored the multiple layers of feminine experiences, who have gradually developed a means of challenging patriarchy in their social surroundings of the home and later on in the public space" (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 206). However, the journey for the woman writer has not yet been completed. Elena Poniatowska's observations about the woman writer in Mexico can be similarly applied to the situation of the Latin American writer in general:

> To be a woman writer […] is still an arduous conquest; the public and the social sanction weighs on women's shoulders, and until very recently it seemed that one could count with the fingers those who believe that women's mind and creativity is intrinsically valuable and therefore an essential part of our civilization. It is even more: without it, ours cannot be called civilization. (quoted in Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 211) (Inaugural Speech at the conference Literatura Mexicana, (1993, 20), Mexican Literature at the University of Pennsylvania in November 1992. 211) .

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In conclusion, The Latin American women writers discussed in this study can be considered forerunners of the Latin American feminist debate.[10] Their fashion of writing constitutes an embryonic search for defining their own subjectivity and self-definition, and their language becomes a means to articulate experience and gain freedom. Rosario Castellanos corroborates this: 'El lenguaje va a ser el medio gracias al cual ella [la mujer], que era originariamente amorfa — en tanto que 'segundo sexo' […] — va a realizar la tarea de construir su existencia, va a arrostrar los riegos de la libertad, va a experimentar la angustia de la elección de una conducta… ['Language will be the means by which she [the woman], who was originally amorphous, since she belonged to the 'second sex' in particular, […] will perform the task of constructing her existence, she will confront the risks of freedom, she will experience the anguish of choosing a mode of behaviour…'] ('La mujer ante el espejo', mentioned in Medeiros-Lichem:1999,28). As a result, it becomes an imperative task for scholarship to rethink the role of the woman writer, not only 'as subject of her own historical and artistic project', but also 'as language user, as practitioner of literary conventions within her corresponding sociocultural codes (empirically and textually given).' Latin American Women's literature, therefore, can be defined as an emblematic hallmark of 'political dissidence' with a distinctive discourse of resistance which constitutes a reservoir for feminine writing. (Diaz-Diocaretz, in Bassnett, 1990, p. 112).

The importance of writing as a subversive vehicle is emphasized when we consider that many women writers were victimized because of their 'sin' of writing. Most women in patriarchal culture must have experienced their gender 'as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy.' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 50). In spite of having been successful writers during their life, they suffered much discrimination in their male-dominated world. Overall, they were advocating their own rights, as women, without any

[10] The works of other authors, who are not explored in this study, such as Elena Garro, Griselda Gambaro, Diamela Eltit, Marta Traba, just to mention a few, also 'spell out experiences that resist to be narrated, and their quest takes place in the language of the unspeakable'. (Medeiros-Lichem, 1999, p. 211).

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difference in class or race. As Victoria Ocampo states: 'privileges of fortune do not change at all the injustices to which women [are] subjected.' (Mentioned in Jehenson, 1995, p. 33).

All in all, Latin American Women´s writing and their own life-experience portray women who urged changes in the situation of women and the marginalization of the Other, leaving a heritage to Latin American women's literary history. All these women and their work represent a 'network of relationships' which reveals 'the strategic discursive consciousness' of Latin American feminine writing.

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