

11 Extending the dimensions of ethnicity and gender in the indigenist prose of Rosario Castellanos

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The main objective of this article is to show how intersectionality can be applied in the analysis of literary material. Compared with the results of previous analyses of the work of the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos, an intersectional approach gives novel conclusions when extended to analysis of the identity formation of the narrative subjects and the power relations between them. In *Balún-Canán*, the first volume of Castellanos's indigenous trilogy published in 1957–1962, gender and ethnicity are not the only variables that define the positions of the characters of the novel. Class, religion, and sexuality tease unconventional power relations out of the traditional binary opposition between masculine/feminine and *mestizo*/indigenous, showing the impotence of the presumably powerful people and their submissiveness to a tradition they cannot control. What feminist theories share with critical discourse analysis is a visibly biased, qualitative approach that takes the side of the dominated people by contrasting their voices with the dominant ones and introduces them to a consciousness-raising process that involves both sides. In Castellanos's prose, neither masculine gender nor *mestizo* origin protects from marginalization. Concentration on the less obvious indicators of marginalization or on factors that even suggest possession of social power may reveal new information on situations described in literature which can then be applicable to real-life situations that need new perspectives. This is why it is important to bring intersectional analysis to literature.

El objetivo principal de este artículo es justificar la aplicación de interseccionalidad al análisis del material literario. En el análisis de la obra de la escritora mexicana Rosario Castellanos, el acercamiento interseccional ofrece novedosas posibilidades al extender el análisis a la formación de la identidad de los sujetos narrativos, o a las relaciones de poder entre estos. En *Balún-Canán*, primera parte de su trilogía indigenista publicada entre 1957 y 1962, el género y la etnicidad no son los únicos variantes que definen las posiciones de los caracteres de la novela. Combinados con la clase, religión y sexualidad, las oposiciones binarias entre lo masculino/femenino, o lo mestizo/indígena sugieren unas relaciones de poder poco convencionales dentro de las cuales las personas supuestamente poderosas no pueden luchar contra la tradición que les subsume. Las teorías feministas, unidas al análisis crítico del discurso representan un acercamiento cualitativo abiertamente parcial que defiende los derechos de los dominados en la sociedad. La voz de los dominados es comparada con aquella de los dominantes introduciendo ambas partes en un proceso de concienciación. En la prosa de Castellanos, ni el género masculino ni el origen mestizo llega a proteger a los sujetos de la narración de marginación. Cuando se concentra en los indicadores menos obvios de la marginación, indicadores que hasta implican posesión de poder social, se puede encontrar información antes conocida a través del análisis de situaciones descritas en la literatura que después pueden ser aplicadas a situaciones de la vida real que requieren nuevas perspectivas.

Introduction

The focus of this article is the indigenist trilogy of the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos. The main objective is to extend analysis to other dimensions of gender and ethnicity than those previous studies have concentrated on, either in the biographical analysis of the author or in the narrative strategies used in Castellanos's work. The trilogy offers a rich source of material for an intersectional approach due to its meticulous description of power relations on both the individual level and the collective level between different social and ethnic groups. At the same time, an analysis of the constitution of the narrative subjects in the gallery of literary characters as described in Auli Leskinen's work gives us the chance to concentrate on the identity formation of the characters. Thus, of the options to theorize either identity or social power mentioned by Elina Vuola, my intention is to touch upon both possibilities through some examples analyzed in this article.

Rosario Castellanos was born in Comitán, Chiapas, in 1924 and suffered an accidental death at the age of forty-nine in Tel Aviv, where she was the Mexican ambassador to Israel, in 1974. In this article, I will discuss the possibilities of applying the intersectional approach to a literary work and will concentrate on the first book of her trilogy, the novel *Balún-Canán*, which was published in 1957. The trilogy was later completed with *Ciudad Real* in 1960 and *Oficio de Tibieblas* in 1962.

In most analyses of the work of Castellanos, the focus has been on the marginalized positions of the characters, produced either by gender or by ethnicity (Cresta de Leguizamon 1976; Ahern 1980; Gil Iriarte 1997, 1999; Lemaître León 2005; D'Lugo 2009). As Margrét Jónsdóttir suggested in 2004 in her analysis of the strategies of contempt toward woman in the work of Castellanos, Castellanos has contributed to feminist research in the relationship between men and women (Jónsdóttir 2006). In this article, I argue that Castellanos's work does not draw solely on the marginalization of women and indigenous people in their relationship with men and *mestizos*. The significance of class and age has been admitted in previous studies, but in intersectional terms, religion and sexuality deserve a more detailed analysis.

This follows the lines of Priscilla Meléndez in "Genealogía y escritura en *Balún-Canán* de Rosario Castellanos": "No se puede identificar un sólo vehículo de opresión que revele la situación particular de un individuo" (It is not possible to identify just one vehicle of oppression that would reveal the particular situation of an individual) (Meléndez 1998: 343). Another observation in line with Meléndez's observation on the multiple oppressions that a feminine character in Castellanos's prose might encounter is the question of the limited number of possibilities of the masculine characters to break from their traditional role, defined primarily by gender and ethnicity.

Setting the scene

In a way that is similar to how a woman's position may be articulated in different ways depending on her ethnic and social background, a man's life, too, seems to carry the same marking points. Masculinity alone does not give protection from marginalization. In *Balún-Canán*, signs of change can be perceived: what happens when a person wants to change or redefine his or her position, or the position of others?

The examples I will analyze, keeping in mind the variables on top of gender, are the situations of Ernesto, the illegitimate son of the uncle of the novel's protagonist, a nine-year-old girl whose name is never mentioned (whereas her younger brother, who dies at the end, has a name); and of Amalia, one of the novel's spinster or old-maid characters, who organizes religious ceremonies in her home during the post-revolutionary period when religion was banned in Mexico.

The samples here are analyzed within the feminist theoretical-methodological framework of intersectionality, with a focus on the function of power relations between the characters of the novel. I am suggesting yet another reading of Castellanos's work that offers a possibility of approaching the problematic of power relations from an innovative and alternative perspective. In addition to the binary opposition between masculine/feminine or indigenous/*mestizo*, the results show the impotence of the presumably powerful people and their submissiveness to a tradition they cannot control.

Theoretical considerations accompanied by methodological demonstrations

One of the ways to define intersectionality is to see it as the relationship of the multiple forms of oppression and social identities where gender is one, but not the only, category that produces social limits and inequalities. I lean on the original definition by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reinforced by her again in 2009, according to which the main characteristic of intersectionality is the factors that together produce marginalization. None of these factors alone, but their combination and their simultaneous presence in a person, produces it (Crenshaw 2009).

It is also important to analyze how specific positions and identities along with political values are constructed, how they are related to each other, and what effects they have in particular places and contexts (Yuval-Davis 2006: 200). These identities are not necessarily related in the sense that an indigenous person would inevitably be poor, although it is not uncommon that in a historical context, people who are positioned at a specific spot on one of the axes of power based on different social divisions tend to accumulate or concentrate at another specific spot on another axis that resembles the first one. The axes I am referring to in this intersectional approach can be imagined as sticks or poles that cross each other at certain points.

If and when the multiplicity and variety of these factors that have influence on a woman's position can be accepted and admitted, the discussion nowadays revolves around the different ways intersectional research can be done (McCall 2005). I base my offer of a multidisciplinary model that might be applied to literature on this methodological challenge and argue that in the prose of Rosario Castellanos, these influential factors are relevant in a man's position as well, and that one of the methods for studying these simultaneously present differences is through language use. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to change the ways power is distributed in a society in a short- and long-term perspective (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 11).

Within intersectional theories, two approaches can be distinguished: the systematic and the constructive. According to the constructive approach, the ideas and actions of an individual contribute to subject formation. Indicators such as gender, ethnicity, or class are not only restrictive forms of categorization; they also imply empowering and narrative resources (Prins 2006: 280).

One proposal that feminist theories and critical discourse analysis share is that both represent a qualitative approach that is visibly biased, taking the side of the dominated people, giving them a voice that is contrasted with the voice of the dominant people, and introducing both into a process of consciousness raising that "opens the eyes" of all participants in the process (Vickers 2002: 68–69). In the prose of Castellanos this voice is given to women and indigenous people, but nevertheless, as I have mentioned before, I aim to amplify the focus, stating that neither masculine gender nor *mestizo* origin is protection from marginalization. Identity formation is more complex, and the intersectional effect depends on the combination of the factors that produce social inequality. In Castellanos's work, conflictive and inextricable relations are not limited to those between men and women, or between *mestizos* and indigenous people, but also in woman-to-woman and man-to-man relations. More possibilities are opened for women and indigenous people (both women and men) to solve situations that look desperate from the outside, than for the masculine characters of the dominant class who find themselves trapped in the environment of social changes produced by the Agrarian Reform. In the material that follows, I will proceed to the examples I have mentioned above.

Historical context

Balún-Canán takes place in the post-revolutionary period of Mexican history when ideas about inequality had been seeded in the minds of Mexican *campesinos*. The revolution had also boosted the organization of women in Mexico. This novel describes the consequences of the implementation of the Agrarian Reform during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). While reform had been

decreed by law back in the nineteenth century, it was only introduced in Chiapas twenty years after the founding of the program in 1917 (Benjamin 1995: 230). The Argüello family returns to its *finca* in Chactajal under these circumstances. The Agrarian Reform produces changes in the physical environment of the characters of *Balún-Canán*, but it is at the same time the prevailing global theme that starts changing the spiritual or psychological development of the characters.

The head of the Argüello family is César, who is married to Zoraida. The family leaves its urban residence as news of the restlessness of the countryside reaches Comitán, the colonial city where the events of the first and last sections of the novel take place. The farmhouse is managed by an indigenous couple, Felipe and his childless spouse, Juana. The anonymous little girl, César and Zoraida's daughter, observes the meeting of these two cultures with mixed feelings, gradually realizing that her closest caretaker, the indigenous nanny who had not come with them from Comitán, could not do so for a reason attached to her ancestry. To fulfill the post-revolutionary government's demands for educating the subaltern farm workers, César spontaneously gives recognition to Ernesto, his nephew, who happens to encounter him under favorable conditions. This meeting leads to a close relationship with the family, in which Ernesto's social status is reorganized at various times according to his capacity to meet his new circumstances.

Meanwhile, life in the city of Comitán is transformed due to changes in people's spiritual and economic situations. Surprisingly, religion offers a way out to Amalia, a single, unmarried woman whose options in traditional Mexican society are limited. In the altered situation, Amalia holds the keys to redemption for the suffering mother, Zoraida, who is about to lose her name-carrying son at the end of the novel. Empowered by the possibilities her status as an unmarried woman offers her, Amalia disturbs the established position of a woman and the anonymity of a daughter in a patriarchal society.

In the following sections, I focus on a literary analysis of these two characters, Ernesto and Amalia.

Analysis: Ernesto

The contradictions between social position and biological origin are well articulated in Ernesto's character. Ernesto is the illegitimate son of the brother of César, the father of the anonymous little girl who is the protagonist of *Balún-Canán*. Ernesto is working as a newspaper boy in Comitán when it occurs to César to offer him a position as a rural teacher, a post that landowners who have workers living on their properties are required by law to provide for. Ernesto's mother is blind, and she has fought for the education of her son in a society that does not recognize illegitimate children. At first sight, education seems like a way to ascend the social ladder. When César approaches him and asks him to sit down in his house, Ernesto resists:

- Es que... no quiero faltarle al respeto. No somos iguales y...
-Pocos piensan ya en estas distinciones. Además somos medio parientes.
¿No es así?
-Soy un hijo bastardo de su hermano Ernesto.
-Algo de eso había yo oído decir. Eres blanco como él, tienes los ojos claros. ¿Conociste a tu padre? (Castellanos: 53)

Ernesto's humble origin is compensated for by his appearance in the eyes of César, who has a number of illegitimate offspring on his ranch. Ernesto's mother describes him: "Es de buena raza. Y no lo digo por mí" (215). But she calls him *kerem*, an indigenous word meaning "child," when she describes how Ernesto has used the coins he has received on his visits to his father: "Y mi *kerem*, en vez de gastarlo en embelequerías o repartirlo con los demás indizuelos, me lo traía para ayudar a nuestras necesidades" (215). Both *kerem* and *indizuelo*, added to Ernesto's mother's notion of race and his uncle's comment on his physical appearance, suggest that he might even have indigenous blood, although his mother describes herself only as a blond, poor, rural woman.

When Ernesto arrives at the ranch, he needs to reconstruct his origin. When César offers him indigenous servants, Ernesto defends himself: "Tengo malos ratos pero no malos gustos, tío" (78). César tries to convince him, referring to his personal experience and the number of half-indigenous children he has on the ranch. Ernesto gets confused and wants to make a clear differentiation between his own ancestry and César's illegitimate children.

Humbleness and humility are transformed into pride in common ancestry with the Argüellos family. On top of failing in his intention to use Ernesto as a teacher, César also finds him unsuited to farm work and sends him to the main house to stay with his spouse, Zoraida. Ernesto feels excluded, especially when he is told to take care of the children of the family. But he gets out of this circle of exclusion through Zoraida's comment on the meaning of language. Ernesto does not speak *tzeltal*, and Zoraida describes the indigenous people to him: "Ellos son tan rudos que no son capaces de aprender a hablar español. (...) Y todavía hay quienes digan que son iguales a nosotros" (93).

Zoraida includes Ernesto in her "nosotros," a "we" that is inferior to the "we" that would have been pronounced by César, but still a "we" belonging to the dominant class. The internal differences in the dominant class are thus constructed by gender and age. The possibilities of climbing the social ladder are diminished by Ernesto's humble social background, and he is capable only of invading a space comparable to that of a woman of the dominant class.

After an uprising by the indigenous farm workers, César asks Ernesto a favor, to deliver a letter to the governor. In secret, Ernesto reads the contents of the letter and starts to dream of a social ascent, made delirious by the idea of becoming the family's savior:

Los indios no eran malos. Lo más que podía decirse de ellos es que eran ignorantes. Le extrañaría tal vez al señor Presidente escuchar esta opinión en los labios de alguien que pertenecía a la clase de los patrones. (Castellanos: 202)

In his vision, the governor is not easily convinced, but in the end, he accompanies Ernesto when he returns to the ranch:

¡Con qué gusto los verían llegar a Chactajal! Él, Ernesto, les había salvado la vida. Y Matilde lo miraría otra vez con los mismos ojos ávidos con que lo vio llegar a Palo María, antes de que las palabras de César le hicieran saber que era un bastardo. Pero ahora, con ese acto de generosidad, iba a convencerlos a todos de que su condición de bastardo no le impedía ser moralmente igual a ellos o mejor. (Castellanos: 203)

Ernesto never reaches the Municipal Hall. He is followed and assassinated by one of the ranch's indigenous workers, who wanted to prevent the delivery of the letter. Ernesto ceases to exist without knowing that his aunt Matilde was pregnant by him. Matilde is César's cousin and another spinster character in the gallery of Castellanos. She does not come to terms with the unexpected pregnancy and tries to commit suicide after learning of her condition. She is rescued once by the indigenous leader of the ranch workers, but after Ernesto's death she surrenders to the *dzulúm*, an indigenous devil, to avoid giving birth to another illegitimate son. That leaves the reader to wonder what would have become of the child of a spinster and a bastard, had he or she had the chance to be born.

The indigenous characters speak through the thoughts of Felipe and Juana in the second section of the novel. The speed of the decline of the upper class is tranquilly observed by the indigenous workers, who are conscious of their enlarged role in changing the society. The character of Ernesto travels through ethnic and social structures despising his half-siblings on the *finca*, children of indigenous women impregnated by his father, and getting himself despised by César when he is moved into the presence of women and children after showing his incapacity to fulfill the norms of a white, dominant-class male in a traditional society.

Amalia: Empowerment by restricting factors

One of the examples of the empowering capacity of the presence of simultaneous differences can be read in the character of Amalia. She lives with her old mother; little by little, time has passed, and by the time Amalia has realized that she was not going to marry, she has also passed the age to join a convent. Her religious

conviction then finds a surprising outlet in an atmosphere that is favorable neither toward unmarried women nor toward religion. The character of Amalia appears for the first time at the beginning of the novel, when Zoraida visits her house with the children: “Cuando nos abren la puerta es como si destaparan una caja de cedro, olorosa, donde se guardan listones desteñidos y papeles ilegibles” (Castellanos: 33).

This observation is at the same time a comment on the social value of an unmarried, aging woman in the society of those times. Something that has a strange odor associated with something that has not been in use for ages, that has lost its color, that no one is interested in, even if that something might have something interesting to tell. Even her physical appearance lacks vivid colors: the shawl she is wearing is “gris, tibio, su cara como lo pétalos que se ha puesto a marchitar entre las páginas de los libros” (Castellanos: 34). And when she smiles, she is actually sad because her hair is losing color and turning grey.

Among the characters of the novel who are single people, Amalia is the only one who stays calm and reasonable. Others, like César’s cousins, have their whims, and all of them go more or less crazy, or at least they seem to do so, and Ernesto loses his life due to an internal division he does not manage to solve. At the very moment Zoraida seeks Amalia’s help toward the end of the novel, Amalia has already transformed herself into the hostess of secret religious ceremonies, hidden because of the conflict between the State and the Catholic Church during the post-revolutionary period.

Amalia’s religious activity is combined with her social position. When Zoraida asks her why she would be willing to take such a risk in organizing gatherings banned by the revolutionary government, Amalia explains that someone has to help the people and offer them religious counsel. According to Amalia, since she is unmarried, it might as well be her, because “a las casadas no les dan permiso sus maridos” (Castellanos: 236).

In spite of the fact that, at first glance, social status and religion could be restrictive for a woman, in the context of the novel these become something emancipating for Amalia. They offer an exit from the mental prison constructed by her mother’s illness and Amalia’s role as a caretaker responsible for her mother’s wellbeing at the same time age is working against her in her desire to devote her life to religion by becoming a nun. She does not need anyone’s permission to organize a banned event at her house, she just moves her mother into another room, which surprises the little protagonist girl: “¿Dónde está la viejecita? ¿Y los muebles?” (235).

This is the same room to which the girl is later sent to play when her little brother is already quite sick and the mother’s last hopes are fixed on a priest they are waiting for in Amalia’s house. As punishment for not behaving well

from the grown-up perspective, the girl is told to play in the same room where the old lady is deposited. It is the space for the most despised people; neither of these two characters has the power to decide her own life. Amalia is in another room that connects her to the outside world, and no one can force her to obey.

Conclusions

To conclude, I must state that the material offers more differences than these present in the definition of the characters' identities. If we concentrate on the less obvious indicators of marginalization or even on indicators that suggest the possession of social power and take into account the existence and effect of various factors in an individual, we may have the chance to reveal the "blind spots" hidden by other kinds of literary analyses.

In real-life situations, the significance of these factors simultaneously present in a person depends on the context and the physical environment of the subject analyzed. The recognition of these blind spots produces new kinds of information and positions people in a different way than when these factors are analyzed separately.

In going back and rereading literature that has been analyzed earlier with different tools, new kinds of information can be obtained and new kinds of knowledge can be produced about the situations described in the literature. Again, this could be applied to real-life situations that need new perspectives.

Gender and ethnicity play an important role in the study of Rosario Castellanos's work. Still, extending the study of gender to the masculine characters in a description of a patriarchal society that supposedly discriminates against women may produce surprising conclusions when other factors are included in the analysis. Masculinity does not guarantee a strong social status in a very traditional society based on social class divisions where marital status has different effects on the offspring born outside marriage and on the actual participants in the institution of marriage. Ernesto overestimated his position as a masculine descendant of the Argüello family and Amalia became liberated by factors that would seemingly restrict her action: female gender and religion. Previous studies on gender and ethnicity in Castellanos's work have concentrated on the marginalized ethnicity, but I insist that turning the gaze to the ethnic majority or the dominant gender in a specific context may bring with it other factors worth including in the intersectional analysis.

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