

IRONY AS SILENT SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY IN ISABEL ALLENDE'S *CUENTOS DE EVA LUNA*

Resumen

En la última década los estudios feministas han sugerido el papel subversivo del silencio en la escritura femenina. El uso de la ironía por parte de Isabel Allende en su colección de cuentos, Cuentos de Eva Luna, se puede ver como una estrategia de silencio porque no se indica el significado del discurso explícitamente a través de las palabras. Allende invierte el uso del silencio, el cual se ve tradicionalmente como un signo de la opresión femenina. Esta inversión se puede ver como una señal al lector que le indica lo que Sara Mills llama en su libro La estilística feminista "la afiliación feminista" del texto. Además, Allende usa la hipérbole para subrayar la absurdidad de los procesos literarios tradicionales usados para caracterizar a las protagonistas femeninas, como el estereotipo, la compensación, la colusión y la recuperación. Gayle Greene y Coppelia Kahn discuten estos procesos en su estudio "Los estudios feministas y la construcción social de la mujer". Allende emplea estos procesos irónicamente para subvertirlos a favor de un mensaje feminista.

Palabras clave: *ironía, silencio, feminista, subversivo, hipérbole*

Abstract

In the last decade various feminist studies have suggested the subversive role of silence in women's writing. Isabel Allende's use of irony in her collection of short stories, Cuentos de Eva Luna, can be seen as a strategy of silence because it does not indicate meaning explicitly through words. Allende's inversion of the use of silence, which is traditionally viewed as a sign of female oppression, can be seen as a cue to the reader that signals what Sara Mills in Feminist Stylistics terms the text's "feminist affiliation." Moreover, Allende's use of hyperbole underscores the absurdity of traditional literary processes used for female literary characterization, such as stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation, as outlined by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn in their study "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Women." Allende ironically employs these processes in order to subvert them in favor of a feminist message.

Keywords: *irony, silence, feminist, subversive, hyperbole*

Silence has been the focus of a number of feminist studies over the last decade. Many of these studies present women's silence as a manifestation of the passive role assigned to women by patriarchal ideology. For example, Amy Kaminsky's *Reading the Body Politic* (1993) views feminist poetics as the attempt to establish a presence or voice for women who have been absent from

or silent in history.¹ However, many other studies suggest that women's silence need not be indicative of passivity, but rather may function as a subversive tool. For example, Debra Castillo in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism* (1992) states:

The revolutionary response to silencing is resemanticization: to use silence as a weapon (to resort to silence) or to break silence women writers must refine such tools as they are given . . . Under old traditional codes the woman . . . remained silent and withdrawn. In the counter hegemonic response to this official silencing she executes a dizzying dance of negativity, appropriating silence as a tactic neither for saying nor for unsaying, but for concealing a coded speech between the lines of the said and the unsaid.²

There are three excellent studies on the subversive potential of silence. The first is Janis Stout's *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* (1990), which focuses on how these writers use a paucity of speech by their characters, as well as a deliberate lack of narrative commentary, as a form of criticism of social norms that victimize or limit the rights and freedom of women.³ The second is King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993), which offers a brilliant study of strategies of indirection as a form of feminism in the Asian-American women writers of the title. Cheung defines three types of silence in her book: rhetorical silence, attentive silence, and provocative silence. According to Cheung, rhetorical silence refers to silence as both theme and method. Silence as theme refers to the societal repression of both men and women, while silence as rhetorical method takes the form of "muted plots" which manifest themselves through devices such as textual ellipses, irony and unreliable narration. Cheung's "attentive silence" focuses on the different gradations of silence. Cheung shows how the traditional interpretation of silence as either oppressively imposed or stoically adopted are reductive and culturally biased. The author illustrates that silences can also be "attentive"; a way of communicating love, forgiveness and other positive emotions in the texts she examines. Provocative silence refers to the paradox "whereby parental and historical silence spurs creativity . . . the absence of information is used as a pretext for artistic license allowing the author to give voice to the voiceless and to subvert patriarchal and historical

¹ Amy Katz Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

² Debra Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992; 38-41.

³ Janis Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1990.

orthodoxy.”⁴ Cheung’s approach emphasizes the role of indirect discourse in the forms of irony, double-voiced discourse and unreliable narration to create a “muted plot” behind the novel’s principal one.

The third study is Jacoba Koene’s “Metaphors of Marginalization and Silencing of Women in *Eva Luna* and *Cuentos de Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende”, which is one of the few studies that actually examines how women’s silence manifests itself in Latin American literature, through the works of Isabel Allende. The first chapter of Koene’s work is an excellent introduction to the topic of silence and espouses a similar thesis to the one that I develop in this article: that silence can indeed be subversive in nature. However, once Koene begins to analyze Allende’s texts, we see that most of her examples actually run counter to her thesis and underscore silence as a negative, passive condition imposed upon women by patriarchal society. Koene’s study, with the exception of a few well placed examples (e.g., her discussion of “El oro de Tomás Vargas”), evolves as an analysis of the evolution of Allende’s characters from silence to appropriation of the word as a form of power (Eva Luna achieves her identity through her role as a writer in the novel *Eva Luna*, while characters like Belisa Crepusculario in “Dos palabras” from *Cuentos de Eva Luna*, also assert authority through words).⁵ Although I agree with Koene’s emphasis on the importance of words and writing in these narratives, I disagree with its opposition to silence as a form of passivity imposed by patriarchy. It is my intention to show how Allende, largely through the use of irony, both thematically and stylistically underscores the active, subversive value of silence and uses this ironic inversion of silence as a signal to the reader to view the text from what Sara Mills (*Feminist Stylistics*, 1995) calls a feminist perspective. Mills proposes a feminist reader-reception model of the literary text, which takes into account both the context of the text’s production and reception (implied and real readers). In other words, Mills argues that all texts incorporate response-inviting structures whose meaning can be actualized in a variety of potential ways according to the implied reader postulated by the author, and then again by the text’s actual reader⁶ (who, according to Wolfgang Iser, may or may not coincide with the implied reader, a completely hypothetical and ideal construct).⁷ Mills’s principal hypothesis is that some texts are written in ways that do not lend themselves to being read within a feminist perspective, while others include textual cues that can potentially (depending upon the specific reader) be interpreted in a way that concretizes the text’s “feminist affiliation.”

⁴ King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993; 24.

⁵ Jacoba Koene, *Metaphors of Marginalization and Silencing of Women in Eva Luna and Cuentos de Eva Luna*, Diss., University of Toronto, 1995.

⁶ Sara Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, London, Routledge, 1995.

⁷ Wolfgang Iser., *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; 107.

These cues include a variety of stylistic (grammatical, lexical and transitivity choices) and thematic options.⁸

In order to understand how Allende constructs *Cuentos de Eva Luna*⁹ through irony, we must first discuss the strategies used by the author to portray women in her short stories. Gayle Greene and Coppellia Kahn, appropriating the terminology used by Michele Barrett in *Women's Oppression Today*,¹⁰ study the ways in which literature reflects gender ideology in its portrayal of women. According to Greene and Kahn Barrett defines four male-dominated processes used for female literary characterization: stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation (21-22). Stereotyping refers to the tendency to portray women according to a fixed, traditional model. Compensation is defined as imagery and ideas that "elevate the moral value of femininity" and collusion as "attempts to parade women's consent to their subordination." Finally, recuperation is the process by which men oppose attempts to challenge the historically dominant meaning of gender.¹¹

At first glance, many of the stories of Allende's *Cuentos de Eva Luna* appear to subscribe to the dominant male ideology, presenting stereotyped female protagonists who consent to their own subordination and who are of an exaggerated moral fiber. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Allende is employing what Joan Radner and Susan Lanser call the technique of appropriation in their article "The Feminist Voice: Coding in Women's Folklore and Literature." According to these authors appropriation refers to "coding strategies that involve adapting to feminist purposes forms or materials normally associated with male culture" (415).¹² In other words, Allende uses stereotyping, compensation and collusion in her texts but converts them into a feminist tool, precisely through their ironic employment. The subtlety of this irony explains why frequently *Cuentos de Eva Luna* have been misinterpreted by critics who fail to perceive it. Since irony is a "silent" technique, one that is developed strictly through an implied but never explicitly stated rejection of a declaration, its use in Allende supports the notion of the primacy of subversive silence in Allende's texts.

In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne C. Booth establishes and defines different categories of irony. According to Booth, the development of what he terms

⁸ Mills, *op.cit.*; pp.31-34

⁹ Isabel Allende, *Cuentos de Eva Luna*, Barcelona, Plaza & Janés Editores, 1989. All subsequent references to the text will refer to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

¹⁰ Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, London, Verso Editions, 1980.

¹¹ Gayle Greene and Coppellia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Women." *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppellia Kahn, London, Methuen, 1985; 28-29.

¹² Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, "The Feminist Voice: Coding in Women's Folklore and Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 412-456.

“stable irony” is a three step process: 1) The reader is required to reject the literal meaning of a discourse; 2) the reader will try out alternative interpretations that are incongruous with the literal statement; 3) the reader chooses a new meaning for the literal statement. Booth summarizes the mental process by which the reader concludes that there is ironic intent in the following manner:

Thus I do not reject a printed statement because of any literal untruth. I reject it because I refuse to dwell with anyone who holds this whole set of beliefs. And then, because I cannot believe that the author of the statement can be that kind of person, I am forced (through psychological and intellectual pressures which I will not even pretend to understand or explain) to make sense out of the statement by concluding that it is ironic.¹³

It is important to note that in almost all of Allende's stories, the use of the figure of hyperbole goes hand in hand with the author's employment of irony. Indeed, excessive exaggeration is one of the key figures that points toward the need to interpret Allende's stories ironically.

The first story in *Cuentos de Eva Luna*, “Dos palabras” is an excellent example. Belisa Crepusculario is a self-made woman from a poor family, who supports herself “selling words” (i.e., writing things for other people). Belisa initially appears to be the victim of the feared civil war hero, The Colonel, whose henchman, el Mulato, abducts her under the Colonel's orders. The Colonel wants Belisa to write a political speech for him that will transform his reputation as a feared and brutal man, and convert him into a popular and beloved presidential candidate. Despite the brutality of her abduction, Belisa adopts a compassionate attitude toward the Colonel:

Ella había aceptado muchos encargos, pero ninguno como ése, sin embargo no pudo negarse, temiendo que el Mulato le metiera un tiro entre los ojos o, peor aún, que el Coronel se echara a llorar. Por otra parte, sintió el impulso de ayudarlo, porque percibió un palpitante calor en su piel, un deseo poderoso de tocar a este hombre, de recorrerlo con sus manos, de estrecharlo entre sus brazos. (15)

This characterization of Belisa fits with the traditional model of the compassionate and love struck female. The fact that Belisa feels pity for the man responsible for kidnapping her suggests elements of female compensation and collusion as well.

However, despite Belisa's original casting as victim in the story, it is she who triumphs over the Colonel in the end, dominating him through the two free words she awards him for the purchase of his speech. The reader is never explicitly told what these words are; he or she is left to infer their content on the basis of the effect they produce on the Colonel in the story:

¹³ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; 35.

En toda ocasión que esas dos palabras venían a su mente, evocaba la presencia de Belisa Crepusculario y se alborotaban los sentidos con el recuerdo del olor montuno, el calor de incendio, el roce terrible y el aliento de yerbabuena, hasta que empezó a andar como un sonámbulo y sus propios hombres comprendieron que se le terminaría la vida antes de alcanzar el sillón de los presidentes Los hombres comprendieron entonces que ya su jefe no podía deshacerse del hechizo de esas dos palabras endemoniadas, porque todos pudieron ver los ojos carnívoros del puma tornarse mansos cuando ella avanzó y le tomó la mano (18-19).

From the reader's perspective, these words that constitute the story's prime catalyst and most potent force, are completely silent, thus emphasizing the idea of the power of silence.

As Sylvia G. Carullo notes in "Fetichismo, magia amorosa y amor erótico en dos cuentos de Isabel Allende," the effects of Belisa's words, indeed the entire relationship between Belisa and the Colonel, is hyperbolic:

El lector llega a comprender la intensidad de la pasión que el coronel siente por medio de la exageración de las propiedades de las palabras. . . . El poder absoluto de estas dos palabras les otorga un sentido mágico . . . las palabras logran el efecto propio de un hechizo tradicional: ganar la atención y amor de un hombre.¹⁴

The exaggerated effect of Belisa's words on the Colonel and their subsequent union leads the reader to question Allende's intention of portraying a traditional, idyllic romance between Belisa and her former captor. The exaggeration of the spell-like effect of Belisa's words (which the reader may infer as a declaration of love in the form of the two words "te amo") underscores the power of women, which in turn subverts the traditional stereotype of the passive female waiting for identity to be bestowed on her by the love of a man. Normally, the man's declaration of love converts female existence into mere male appendage. Allende's portrayal of the love affair between Belisa and the Colonel is an ironic inversion of the traditional male/female romantic roles in which the man "conquers" the female. Allende ironically appropriates the strategies of stereotyping and compensation from traditional male ideology and thus silently converts them into cues that signal the text's feminist affiliation. Belisa, the female protagonist, emerges as the powerful and triumphant character in the text.

A second good example of Allende's appropriation of the technique of compensation is found in the story "La mujer del juez." Casilda, the judge's wife, is initially presented as a silent, weak, and passive figure. Firstly, the title itself suggests that Casilda is not a person in her own right, but merely her husband's appendage, "the judge's wife," without her own identity. Secondly, she is described as silent and almost invisible on the text's very first page:

¹⁴ Sylvia G. Carullo, "Fetichismo, magia amorosa y amor erótico en dos cuentos de Isabel Allende," *Texto Crítico* 3.4-5 (1997): 127.

Los domingos acudía con su esposo a la misa de doce, imperturbable bajo su mantilla española, intocada por las inclemencias de ese verano perenne, descolorida y silenciosa como una sombra. Nadie le oyó algo más que un saludo tenue ni le vieron gestos más osados que una inclinación de la cabeza o una sonrisa fugaz, parecía volátil, a punto de esfumarse en un descuido. Daba la impresión de no existir . . . (140)

This original casting of Casilda within the traditional female stereotype is subsequently contradicted by a number of other elements in the story. For example, we are told that after the judge marries her he becomes less stern and more just, and that everyone “se sorprendieron al ver su influencia en el Juez, cuyos cambios eran notables.” (140). Moreover, when the Judge imprisons the mother of the infamous criminal Nicolás Vidal, Casilda is the only one who can persuade the Judge to feed the starving woman, whose fast is intended to lure Vidal out of hiding and lead to his capture. Finally, when the Judge dies and Casilda and her children are pursued for revenge by the relentless Vidal, Casilda devises a plan to gain time until the authorities can arrive and capture Vidal. Knowing that Vidal will rape her, she decides to dazzle him with her lovemaking abilities and thus stall him until the police catch up with him. This strategy leads to the story’s incredible final paragraph in which Casilda and Vidal appear to fall in love:

Durante esa inolvidable tarde ella no perdió de vista que su objetivo era ganar tiempo, pero en algún momento se abandonó, maravillada de su propia sensualidad, y sintió por ese hombre algo parecido a la gratitud. Por eso, cuando oyó el ruido lejano de la tropa le rogó que huyera y se ocultara en los cerros. Pero Nicolás Vidal prefirió envolverla en sus brazos para besarla por última vez, cumpliendo así la profecía que marcó su destino. (147)

This final paragraph is predicated on a romantic hyperbole: Casilda’s sexual gratification is so great that she forgets her revenge on Vidal and urges him to flee, while he corresponds in kind by sacrificing his life for the privilege of a last kiss and final few moments in her arms. Thus, Allende once again appropriates the techniques of female stereotyping (Casilda becomes the woman who is dominated by her love of a man) and compensation. Patricia Hart interprets the ending as an example of the latter, viewing it as one of the many instances of female forgiveness in Allende’s stories, which is a way in which the chain of senseless male violence and revenge is broken by the moral superiority of women. According to Hart:

Magic feminism occurs in works in which real and impossible (or wildly improbable) events are juxtaposed, when this juxtaposition is narrated matter-of-factly, and when the telling of the apparently impossible events leads to the understanding of larger truths that hold outside of the text.¹⁵

¹⁵ Patricia Hart, “Magic Feminism in Isabel Allende’s *The Stories of Eva Luna*,” *Multicultural Literatures Through Feminist/Poststructuralist Lenses*. Ed. Barbara Frey Waxman. Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1993; p.; 105.

The story's absurd and surprising conclusion is an hyperbole that fulfills the function of what Radner and Lanser call the technique of distraction. According to the authors:

We use the term distraction to describe strategies that draw out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message. Usually distraction involves creating some kind of "noise," interference or obscurity that will keep the message from being heard except by those . . . who suspect the message is there. In literature the "noise" . . . is stylistic.¹⁶

We can think of Allende's use of hyperbole as a type of "distraction" designed to "tone down" the feminist message. In the case of "The Judge's Wife," that message is explicitly stated in the final paragraph when the narrator tells us that Casilda "did not forget for one instant throughout that memorable afternoon, that her objective was to gain time." In other words, Casilda is not engaging in sexual activity for love or fun, but for self-preservation. Her incredible moment of forgiveness coupled with Vidal's equally incredible self-sacrifice for love, serve as a textual distraction from this message. However, this exaggerated denouement does not lead the reader to accept their mutual feelings, but rather to reject them as highly implausible. Allende constructs the hyperbole as a parody of romantic stereotypes in which women routinely fall in love with their rapists. Allende ironically appropriates an ideological device of patriarchy and uses it in an implicitly critical manner. The story's ultimate message, from which the reader is temporarily distracted through its hyperbolic ending, is that Casilda is stronger and smarter than the male counterpart she has outwitted and triumphed over in the story.

Casilda's victory over Vidal is emphasized by Vidal's initial underestimation of Casilda's power. At the very beginning of the story we are told that Vidal "no la encontró atractiva" and that she had "unos dedos finos, inútiles para dar placer a un hombre . . . Tan insignificante y remota le pareció Casilda que no tomó precauciones con ella" (139). Vidal's fate is to die for a woman. It is thus highly ironic that Casilda turns out to be the one and ends up conquering him precisely with the sexual prowess of which he deems her totally lacking. Vidal suffers from the poor judgment men stereotypically attribute to women. Thus, the man who initially appears more intelligent and powerful, ends up the victim who will lose his life at the end of the story. Allende's ironic inversion of traditional stereotypes serves to deconstruct them and to situate the reader within a feminist perspective.

Another good example of ironic appropriation is found in the story "Una venganza." Dulce Rosa Orellano, the orphaned daughter of a murdered senator, might also initially be seen as the weak, stereotyped female victim. She is raped by Tadeo Céspedes, her father's political opponent. She is initially portrayed as

¹⁶ Radner and Lanser, *op. cit.*, p.; 417.

the silent, passive and suffering female: “Entonces acudió a su mente la niña vestida de baile y coronada de jazmines, que lo soportó en silencio en aquella habitación oscura donde el aire estaba impregnado de olor a pólvora” (207). Despite her subsequent sworn revenge, years later Tadeo and Dulce fall in love and Dulce forgives him for his past deeds in a hyperbolic act of female compensation. However, this apparent compensation is used as a stepping stone toward Dulce’s ultimate revenge and triumph over Tadeo. Since the rape years ago, Dulce’s memory has haunted Tadeo. Despite her forgiveness, Dulce is caught between her promised revenge to her father and her desire to marry Tadeo. She kills herself, thus condemning Tadeo to a long life of misery without her: “Y [Céspedes] adivinó que viviría hasta los noventa años, para pagar su culpa con el recuerdo de la única mujer que su espíritu podía amar” (210). In other words, Allende’s story doesn’t carry a message of forgiveness of the rapist (which would have resulted in the Dulce’s marriage to him and a so-called “happy” ending), but rather results in the execution of revenge and punishment for Tadeo Céspedes. Dulce’s supposed transformation from revenge seeker to her rapist’s lover is so exaggerated and incredible that it leads the reader to an ironic interpretation that questions rather than confirms traditional gender ideology. The very method used to suggest forgiveness (love of the enemy) is the instrument used to exact revenge (tormenting him with her memory after her suicide).

The entire story “Clarisa” is an ironic twist on the notion of female stereotyping and compensation. Clarisa is the self-sacrificing wife and mother *par excellence*. She supports and cares for her insane husband and two mentally retarded children without ever complaining or feeling pessimistic, at that same time that she does good deeds in the town and is viewed by her neighbors as a saint. Clarisa is supposedly so traditional and old-fashioned that her death is attributed to the shock she experiences upon witnessing during the Pope’s visit: “una columna de hombres vestidos de monjas, con las caras pintarrajeadas, enarbolando pancartas en favor del aborto, el divorcio, la sodomía y el derecho de las mujeres a ejercer el sacerdocio” (40). The narrator reports that Clarisa “se murió de asombro cuando llegó el Papa de visita y le salieron al encuentro los homosexuales disfrazados de monjas” (33). Once again, Allende uses hyperbole to subvert an image. The reader begins to doubt the validity of Clarisa’s staid and perfect character, faced with the incredible idea that her death was due to shock at seeing the homosexuals dressed like nuns. This ironic appropriation of female stereotyping and compensation is further supported by the discovery of Clarisa’s infidelity with Diego Cienfuegos at the end of the story. She is not the traditional woman who perfectly subscribes to society’s moral rules, but rather establishes her own version of morality, justifying her affair that produced two normal children as a necessary balance for the two retarded children born through her marriage.

Clarisa’s saintliness is also subverted by the result of some of her good

deeds. For example, at the beginning of the story we are led to believe that she reforms a robber who attempted to steal from her and sent her Christmas presents every year thereafter. However, we later learn that the robber continued to steal, that he “no había enmendado el rumbo y estaba convertido en un verdadero profesional” (43). He tells Clarisa when he visits her on her deathbed: “Me va muy bien. Ahora me meto nada más en las casas del barrio alto. Le robo a los ricos y eso no es pecado. Nunca he tenido que usar violencia, yo trabajo limpiamente, como un caballero —explicó con cierto orgullo” (43). The robber, like Clarisa, subscribes to his own moral rules, not society’s. Thus Clarisa’s supposed ability to heal and reform is ironically treated and contradicts the image created of Clarisa as a flawless human being.

The ironic subversion of Clarisa as saint is not intended as a condemnation of the protagonist, but rather of the society that imposes such norms and expectations. Clarisa’s logic and values prove compelling, and the contrast between these and the appropriated female stereotyping and compensation, serves to situate the reader within a feminist textual perspective. It is the ironic counterpoint of hyperbolic extremes, sainthood versus marital infidelity, that points the reader in the appropriate direction.

The description of Elena Mejías in “Niña perversa” evokes the stereotyped image of a silent, invisible girl:

Esos trabajos de espía habían acentuado la condición incorpórea de la muchacha, que se esfumaba entre las sombras de los cuartos, existía en silencio y aparecía de súbito, como si acabara de retornar de una dimensión invisible. Madre e hija trabajaban juntas en las múltiples ocupaciones de la pensión, cada una inmersa en su callada rutina, sin necesidad de comunicarse. (22)

However, words are not necessary here for communication because despite the silence, Elena’s mother knows what her daughter is thinking: “pero su madre tenía un instinto certero para detectar sus fantasías. Del mismo modo descubriría si su hija le ocultaba información” (22). Elena develops a passion for a new boarder in her mother’s boarding house, Juan José Bernal, who becomes her mother’s lover. Elena cannot express her budding adolescent sexual feelings through words and turns to ritual, a form of silent expression instead. Every night, when she knows Bernal is out of his room:

Abandonaba su hamaca y salía como un fantasma a vagar por el primer piso, juntando valor para entrar por fin sigilosa al cuarto de Bernal. Cerraba la puerta a su espalda y abría un poco la persiana, para que entrara el reflejo de la calle a alumbrar *las ceremonias* que había inventado para apoderarse de los pedazos del alma de ese hombre, que se quedaban impregnando sus objetos. . . . Del armario sacaba una camisa y las botas de Bernal y se las ponía. Daba unos pasos por el cuarto con mucho cuidado, para no hacer ruido. Así vestida hurgaba en sus cajones, se peinaba con su peine, chupaba su cepillo de dientes, lamía su crema de afeitarse, acariciaba su ropa sucia. Después, sin saber por qué lo hacía, se quitaba la camisa, las botas y su camisón y se tendía sobre la cama de Bernal, aspirando con avidez su olor,

invocado su calor para envolverse en él. Se tocaba todo el cuerpo . . . Por fin una noche, de regreso del cuarto de Bernal donde había cumplido sus *ritos de enamorada* . . . Con la destreza aprendida en tantos años de hacerse invisible, atravesó la puerta cerrada y los vio entregados al placer. . . y pudo observar con toda atención para aprender de su madre los gestos que habían logrado arrebatarle a Bernal, gestos más poderosos que . . . sus *silenciosas* llamadas, que todas sus *ceremonias mágicas* . . . (26-28, my emphases)

After witnessing her mother and Bernal making love, Elena sneaks into Bernal's room one day while he is asleep and attempts to replace her mother. Bernal rejects her advances, and after this episode Elena is sent off to boarding school while Bernal and her mother marry. Ironically, after Bernal rejects Elena, he becomes obsessed with her: "el recuerdo de esos huesos livianos, de esa mano infantil en su vientre, de esa lengua de bebé en su boca, fue creciendo hasta convertirse en una obsesión" (31). Years later, when Elena is grown and about to marry, she visits her mother and stepfather. The latter, who has lived all these years tormented by desire for her, confronts her about the episode, but her response is an ironic and silent lack of recall of the incident:

Elena lo miró asombrada y no supo qué contestar. ¿De qué niña perversa le hablaba? Para ella la infancia había quedado muy atrás y el dolor de ese primer amor rechazado estaba bloqueado en algún lugar sellado de la memoria. No guardaba ningún recuerdo de aquel jueves remoto. (32)

Once again, Allende's story provides an ironic inversion of traditional stereotypes through an appropriation of them. She employs the stereotype of the female ruled by her passion for a man, only to invert it and create an obsessive male passion that translates into an unhappy life for Bernal. Elena goes on to lead a normal life, but much in the same way as Dulce's memory torments Tadeo Céspedes, so does Elena's torment Bernal.

"El oro de Tomás Vargas" is also based on an ironic plot twist. In this story, Allende not only appropriates female stereotyping and compensation, but also relies heavily on other techniques of indirection, such as implication. The story initially presents his wife Antonia as her husband's passive victim:

Antonia Sierra, la mujer de Vargas, era veintiséis años menor que él. Al llegar a la cuarentena ya estaba muy gastada, casi no le quedaban dientes sanos en la boca y su aguerrido cuerpo de mulata se había deformado por el trabajo, los partos y los abortos; . . . A veces andaba con el cuerpo sembrado de magullones azules y aunque nadie preguntaba, toda Agua Santa sabía de las palizas propinadas por su marido. (54)

Antonia's moral capacity is elevated through her generosity toward Concha Díaz, Vargas's pregnant concubine who ends up living with them: "Deseaba, a pesar suyo, que el futuro de Concha Díaz no fuera tan funesto como el propio. Ya no le tenía rabia, sino una callada compasión . . ." (58). Of course, Concha is simply another of Vargas's victims, which leads to a bonding between the

two women. The story goes on to narrate how Vargas loses a gambling debt but can't pay it because when he goes to dig up his hidden gold, it is not where he put it. Vargas is subsequently killed for his failure to pay his debt, while Antonia and Concha go on to live a happy life together:

Las dos mujeres siguieron viviendo juntas, dispuestas a ayudarse mutuamente en la crianza de los hijos y en las vicisitudes de cada día. Poco después del sepelio compraron gallinas, conejos y cerdos, fueron en bus a la ciudad y volvieron con ropa para toda la familia . . . Y así salieron de la miseria y se iniciaron en el camino de la prosperidad. (63)

The reader is never explicitly told what happened to Vargas's gold. However, this paragraph implies that Antonia and Concha dug up the gold and used it to make these purchases and establish a better life for themselves. Ironically, it is the supposedly weak and victimized women who outwit and triumph over the miserly and abusive Vargas. The story uses both appropriation and silent implication to make its point and situate the reader within a feminist perspective.

"Si me tocaras el corazón" is an excellent example of what Michele Barrett terms female collusion. Allende ironically appropriates female collusion to subvert its validity. In this story, Amadeo Peralta seduces Hortensia, a young girl of fifteen. He abandons her after a brief sexual encounter, but Hortensia shows up on his doorstep the next day. Peralta, on the brink of marrying another, decides to keep Hortensia as his concubine hidden in an underground pit, but soon forgets about her. He leaves an Indian woman in charge of feeding her. After forty-seven years Hortensia is discovered by some children playing near the pit. Peralta is arrested. However, Hortensia is not angry with him and plays her psaltery every day outside his prison.

On the surface it may appear that Hortensia colludes with Peralta to effect her own mistreatment. After all, it is she who sought out Peralta after their initial encounter and who "clung to his shirt with the terrifying submission of a slave" (92). However, upon closer examination, we see that Allende has strewn "clues" throughout the text that negate Hortensia's responsibility for her own victimization. The most compelling contradiction is found in the story's first paragraph, when we learn that Hortensia does not have a normal mental capacity: "la muchacha era simple de espíritu y no comprendió el sentido de sus palabras, aunque tal vez la sedujo el tono de la voz." (66). Similarly, at the end of the story, we are told: "Cada día, a las diez de la mañana, Hortensia caminaba con su vacilante paso de loca hasta el penal y le entregaba al vigilante de la puerta una marmita caliente para el preso. —El casi nunca me dejó con hambre —le decía al portero en tono de excusa" (73). Hortensia only colludes with her own victimization because she is mentally incapacitated, not because she is a woman who accepts a passive, abused role. Consequently, the ideology behind collusion is subverted and Hortensia is exonerated from any real responsibility for her victimization.

Furthermore, the story's conclusion ironically inverts the roles of victim and victimizer. Amadeo Peralta ends up in jail, just as he had incarcerated Hortensia for forty-seven years. The torture she suffered in the form of neglect is paralleled by the torture Peralta suffers by hearing an overly solicitous Hortensia play her psaltery every day outside his prison:

Encogido al otro lado de los muros, Amadeo Peralta escuchaba ese sonido que parecía provenir del fondo de la tierra y que le atravesaba los nervios. Ese reproche cotidiano debía significar algo, pero no podía recordar. A veces sentía unos ramalazos de culpa, pero enseguida le fallaba la memoria y las imágenes del pasado desaparecían en una niebla densa. No sabía por qué estaba en esa tumba y poco a poco olvidó también el mundo de la luz, abandonándose a la desdicha. (73)

Hortensia's inability to forget about Peralta (in the form of her music) causes Peralta to suffer. This is a deliberate inversion of the neglect that made Hortensia suffer. Thus, the female protagonist unwittingly triumphs over her male victimizer at the end of the story, defeating the reader's ability to lend credence to notions of female collusion and situating him or her in a feminist perspective.

Hortensia is a "silent" protagonist in many ways. She is locked away from the world and unable to communicate with it for forty-seven years. When she is finally rescued by her neighbors we are told that "En tantos años de encierro había perdido el uso de las palabras y la voz le salía a sacudones, como un ronquido de moribundo" (68). The way in which Hortensia communicates is through her music:

Sólo las manos mantuvieron su forma y tamaño, ocupadas siempre en el ejercicio del salterio, aunque ya sus dedos no recordaban las melodías aprendidas y y en cambio le arrancaban al instrumento el llanto que no le salía del pecho. (70)

Indeed, as we have seen, it is through her psaltery playing that Hortensia "communicates" with the imprisoned Peralta in the end, grating on his nerves and making his incarceration unbearable. The use of music can be seen as a form of ritualistic and nonverbal communication.

Similarly, the story "María la boba" presents an ironic enjoyment of prostitution by its protagonist, "simple María." María, like Hortensia, is not mentally intact:

Quando María tenía doce años, atravesó distraída un cruce de ferrocarril y la atropelló un tren de carga. La rescataron entre los rieles sin daños aparentes, tenía sólo algunos rasguños y había perdido el sombrero. Sin embargo, al poco tiempo, todos pudieron comprobar que el impacto había transportado a la niña a un estado de inocencia del cual ya nunca regresaría. (117-118)

María shares a passionate relationship with a drunken Greek sailor who later abandons her. She innocently seeks to repeat this experience with a string of

men, thus converting herself into a prostitute. Despite her mental lack and “el mismo entusiasmo por cada encuentro con un hombre,” the story “silently” tells us that María is dissatisfied with her life and wishes to die. As Jacoba Koene notes,¹⁷ the text implies (but never states) that María commits suicide by drinking a poisoned cup of hot chocolate:

—Ahora me llegó el tiempo de morir —fue su única explicación.

Se recostó en la cama, con la espalda apoyada sobre tres almohadones, con fundas almidonadas para la ocasión, y se bebió sin respirar una jarra grande de chocolate espeso. Las otras mujeres se rieron, pero cuando cuatro horas después no hubo manera de despertarla comprendieron que su decisión era absoluta y echaron a corer la voz por el barrio. . . . Alguien sugirió que tal vez había tragado veneno con el chocolate, en cuyo caso todos serían culpables por no haberla llevado a tiempo al hospital, pero nadie prestó atención a tales maledicciones. (116-117)

Once again, the text silently negates the stereotype of enjoyable prostitution, first by emphasizing María's mental incapacitation, and second, by implying her suicide. The stereotype is appropriated and then inverted through Allende's subtle irony.

The story “Tosca” presents an interesting counterpart to the theme of silence in *Cuentos de Eva Luna*. As we have seen, silence is frequently seen in a positive light, as a form of rebellion and communication. In “Tosca” Allende forms a logical opposition between words and silence by characterizing the loquacious protagonist, Maurizia as a vapid, selfish woman. Maurizia is married to Ezio Longo, a strong, self-made man who loves her dearly and would do anything for her. Together they have a son. Maurizia loves opera and music and is dissatisfied with what she perceives as her husband's lack of culture. She meets a medical student who loves opera on the bus one day and together they pursue a romance that leads Maurizia to leave her family. Maurizia later discovers that her lover is not all that she thought he was, but refuses to admit his failings:

“empeñada en embellecer cada instante con palabras, ante la imposibilidad de hacerlo de otro modo. . . se impuso la tarea de mostrarle al mundo que ambos eran los protagonistas de un amor excepcional, . . . (93)

Thirty years later Maurizia meets Ezio Longo and her son again. She wants to approach them, speak to them and ask forgiveness for the years of neglect, but in a rare moment of wisdom, leaves the tavern in silence:

En ese instante, cuando un solo paso más le habría sacado de la zona de la sombra y puesto en evidencia, el joven se inclinó, aferró la muñeca de su padre y le dijo algo con un guiño simpático. Los dos estallaron en carcajadas, palmoteándose los brazos, desordenándose mutuamente el cabello, con una ternura viril y una firme complicidad

¹⁷ Koene, *op.cit.*, 200.

de la cual Maurizia Rugieri y el resto del mundo estaban excluidos. Ella vaciló por un momento infinito en la frontera entre la realidad y el sueño, luego retrocedió, salió de la taberna, abrió su paraguas negro y volvió a su casa con la guacamaya volando sobre su cabeza, como un estrafalario arcángel de calendario. (97)

Most of the examples we have examined from *Cuentos de Eva Luna* illustrate Radner and Lanser's technique of appropriation. However, there is one excellent example of what the two authors term "juxtaposition" that frames Allende's collection of short stories. According to Radner and Lanser:

Because context can powerfully affect interpretation, the ironic arrangement of texts, artifacts, or performances is a major technique of female coding. An item that seems unremarkable or unambiguous in one environment may develop quite tendentious levels of meaning in another. In literary texts juxtaposition may be effected through titles, epigraphs, the placement of stanzas, voices or paragraphs.¹⁸

Allende frames *Cuentos de Eva Luna* between two quotations from *A Thousand and One Nights*. The first appears before the text's prologue:

El rey ordenó a su visir que cada noche le llevara una virgen y cuando la noche había transcurrido mandaba que la matasen. Así estuvo haciendo durante tres años y en la ciudad no había ya ninguna doncella que pudiera servir para los asaltos de este cabalgador. Pero el visir tenía una hija de gran hermosura llamada Scheherazade . . . y era muy elocuente y daba gusto oírla. (7)

After the text's last story, the following epigraph appears: "Y en ese momento de su narración Scheherazade vio aparecer la mañana y se calló discretamente" (249). Anyone familiar with *A Thousand and One Nights* knows that Scheherazade narrates a series of tales as a means to stay alive through the night, knowing that her life will be spared if she is able to entertain the king until morning. Her verbal ability parallels that of the narrator of the *Cuentos de Eva Luna*, and is seen as a way of combating her victimizer, the abusive king. However, once she no longer needs to speak, we are told that Scheherazade chooses silence, the weapon used by women throughout the *Cuentos de Eva Luna*. This use of juxtaposition is interesting, because it negates the dichotomy established by patriarchal society between speech and silence. Allende juxtaposes traditional ideology (speech as power) to a subversive ideology (silence as power), and shows the falsity of the exclusivity of speech's power as developed by patriarchal society. Allende illustrates how both speech and silence are forms of communication and power that can and should be employed by women. Hence, the placement of these epigraphs dialogues with the content of the stories in a way that enhances their message and emphasizes the power of women over their male abusers (whether through verbal or nonverbal strate-

¹⁸ Radner and Lanser, *op.cit.*; p.; 416.

gies), which is the ultimate message of Allende's text.

It is interesting that Allende omits the passage from *A Thousand and One Nights* that explicitly states the significance of Scheherazade's speech and subsequent silence. The reader familiar with the intertext must fill in the textual gaps of *Cuentos de Eva Luna* and hence the ultimate significance of the epigraphs is implicitly rendered to the text's audience, once again emphasizing the power of silence.

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