

Peggy Job

# WOMEN NOVELISTS IN MEXICO REFLECT THEIR REALITY

*If until now a woman has not been made visible, if she conforms to an image that has been dictated by society, the Church, the family, then how is it possible for her to appear through her writing?*

Elena Poniatowska, 1975.

*I think that when a woman has felt affected by living in a sexist society, it is inevitable that this be reflected in her works.*

Gabriela Rábago Palafox, 1981.

*Really, the Mexican male is very weak in relation to the opposite sex, and so long as you know how to play the flirt, and aren't too ugly, they won't put obstacles in your way. That's why I don't think women in Mexico who want to publish have trouble simply because they are women.*

Esther Seligson, 1974.

It has been said that there were no women writers of worth in Mexico between Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (17th century) and Rosario Castellanos (1925-74). While there may be some truth to that, we need to ask how much of it is history rather than "herstory", before relegating such a splendid chronicler of the Mexican Revolution as Nellie Campbell, for instance, to obscurity. While Esther



Elena Poniatowska. (Photo from Novedades archive)

Seligson identifies one reality, her tongue-in-cheek comment obscures another: the bulk of her own work has been published through cooperative, self-publishing ventures.

When it comes to contemporary Mexican women writers, rather depressingly, the assumptions are clearer than the reality. The few recognized names, like Castellanos or Elena Poniatowska, perhaps Julieta Campos or Elena Garro, and probably Angeles Mastretta since her first novel was a recent bestseller, give no indication of the range or quality of works. Since 1970, over 50 women have published novels or collections of short stories.

When we consider the odds against women publishing, the figure becomes even more impressive. For a woman to write and publish anywhere is difficult; to do so in Mexico is an act of courage, perseverance and sheer single-mindedness. Although the literacy rate in Mexico is over 90 percent, for many it is no more than functional literacy, and the most common reading materials are comics, for adults and children alike. A new novel costs about the same as the daily minimum wage. A writer cannot hope to live off her novels or stories, nor can publishers expect to sell more than 1000 to 3000 copies (a typical first-run edition) of a work by a little-known writer. So women who want to write, in addition to the necessary space and time, must have another source of income. This means they are almost exclusively from the middle or upper class, a situation reflected in their works. So they

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teach, they take workshops, launch books, write for newspapers, edit and proofread the work of others, and/or they have an affluent husband. A far cry indeed from Virginia Woolfe's quiet garret on 500 pounds a year.

Moreover, Woolfe had a sympathetic publisher husband and no children; in Mexico many aspects of the traditional roles of wife and mother still persist, and the writer creates in her spare moments. The very low productivity of most women writers in Mexico attests to this situation, as does the increased production when children are older, or after a divorce.

All these factors are reflected in the kinds of writing we find in women's novels and stories, in their themes and concerns. So, who are the writers, and what do they write about?

#### Another Manner of Challenging

Perhaps we should begin with what they are not about. We don't have an Erica Jong or a Ruby Mae Brown, nor a Marge Piercy. We don't have the equivalent of

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smart-arse New Yorkers or up-front Californians, challenging the Establishment in as many ways as possible, blatantly and defiantly outrageous. Nor do we hear the voices of drug addicts, prostitutes, lesbians, single mothers or drop-outs, all themes of the times in North American women's literature. For a foreigner, reading these works is like entering a time warp at first; but one needs to persevere and discover another manner of challenging. There is a subtlety in the best of these Mexican women writers that recalls the traditions of the 19th century, more than the late 20th. The whispers of Jane Austin and the Brontes, together with the shared colonialism of writers like Nadine Gordimer or the early Doris Lessing, pervade these novels and stories, richly

blended with elements of the pre-conquest culture of Mexican legend and belief structures, and a Catholicism that invades when least expected.

The works of women are almost exclusively slim volumes; there are no epic tales in either size or content, and the historical novel is virtually absent. A good-humored, tongue-in-cheek adventure yarn is impossible to find. There are no Great Love stories, though there is love and loss, passion and despair. Sexuality is not often explicit and is almost always male-female. While a number of writers have created minor homosexual characters, lesbianism and masturbation don't appear in the literature until the 1980s, and the only case of oral sex is punished immediately: the characters are stoned to death! While this apparent reticence has many possible explanations, it is important to emphasize that many stories and novels have an intense undercurrent of sensuality and eroticism, subtle, but all pervasive, like the smell of flowers and markets in Aline Petterson's novels (see box).

## ALINE PETTERSON: A NAME TO WATCH

Aline Petterson has published five novels in the past 10 years. Yet even more extraordinary than her productivity is the consistently high quality of her work, as she has attempted very different kinds of novels. Reputed to be modest and shy, she is more commonly seen accompanying the now aging Josefina Vicens, another splendid writer, than at book parties or panel discussions on the state-of-the-art. Her books manifest a delicacy disguising both daring and passionate sensuality.

Her first novel, *Círculos* (Circles, 1977) narrates a day-in-the-life of a middle-class housewife and mother in Mexico City. Ana interpolates her memories of childhood and adolescence throughout the day. She is unhappy, but finds no logical reason to be so, given her good husband, her children, comfortable economic situation, her lover. The lover (or is he the husband as he used to be?) is not posed as an alternative to her life, but as part of it. None of Petterson's women characters see love as the answer; there is always something else, within each of them, that needs to be touched, felt, explored.

Her second, *Casi en silencio* (Almost in Silence, 1980) is structurally a much more ambitious novel. It is narrated from three perspective: Bruno's, a university professor, and Gabriel's and Virginia's, his students. The three are kindred spirits, each writers; they explore their interrelationships delicately. Woven into the text are their discussions on Virginia Woolfe's *Orlando* and references to Proust; thus, the characters are both intimately accessible to the reader as real people and representations of other literary figures. It is, perhaps, the least accomplished of Petterson's novels.

*Proyectos de muerte* (Death Projects, 1983) is the diary of a middle-aged architect, hospitalized and dying of cirrhosis. The confined white world of Room 401, with its four moribund occupants, is the last world left to him, and his journey through the phases of dying defined by Kubler Ross is disturbingly narrated.

In 1986 Petterson published two short novels, both attesting to her fine talent. *Sombra ella misma* (Shadow Herself) tells the story of Adelina, single and 60, who owns a stationary shop. The first part describes a day in her life, a day which she concludes by sealing

her house, strangling her canary Felipe and turning on the gas. This section is carefully constructed so that we are at a distance from Adelina; her behavior and reactions are not explained. It reads rather like a detective story, with clues and hints to provoke our curiosity. Adelina dreams, and her dreams seem curiously out of character with the dry, gray spinster whose daily routines haven't varied for decades. The second part is Adelina's diary, the secret of her apparently ordinary, uneven life. Over 30 years ago she was raped — though that is not quite the right word — on a train by a man named Felipe, who she'd just met. Adelina's is really the story of a woman whose sexuality is irreversibly awakened, but who is then abandoned. The intensity of the frustration — in this case sexual — can almost be smelled on the pages.

*Los colores ocultos* (The Hidden Colors) begins with the proverbial slammed door, although Elena, being rather timid, closes it with just the force needed. She is leaving, but quietly, without fuss. A modern woman, an artist and gallery director, Elena has been married to Carlos, loved Daniel, her fellow artist who proved impotent, and lived for some time in free union with René. Her son Andrés, died in childhood. Since adolescence she has loved her friend Isabel; their relationship has been tender and supportive, and sexual. But Elena is not fulfilled; her interior voices sometimes take possession of her, their murmurs imperative, their message unclear. She seeks herself, not through others, but within herself.

Petterson is a very subtle and erudite writer. She makes compulsive reading with her spare style and such carefully elaborated structures that we are barely aware of them. It is a modest kind of writing, almost gentle. We could easily miss the fact that she breeches most of the tabus observed by nearly every other Mexican woman narrator. Her characters have lesbian and homosexual relationships, they masturbate, they fantasize scandalously, they sometimes can't stand their mothers or their children, and fathers feel "funny" about daughters. They are real people, convincingly portrayed.

Aline Petterson is among the best writers in Mexico today. Do read her work.

In contrast to the U.S., a curious and rather depressing characteristic of recent women's writing in Mexico is the presence of misogyny. In very recent books like *Pánico o Peligro* (Panic or Danger, 1983) by María Luisa Puga, *El bien y el mal* (The Good and the Bad, 1986) by Manu Dornbierer or *Las líneas de la mano* (The Lines of the Hand, 1985) by Hortensia Moreno, we find some evidence of close friendships and solidarity between women characters. Yet during most of this period—which includes the International Women's Decade—rivalry and envy, betrayal and identification with men characterized women's relationships. Not surprisingly, these characters are terribly alone, their conflicts and problems presented as personal, and not the product of a social system that isolates all of them. Nor is the mother-daughter relationship explored; the few times it does appear, it is conflictive and marked by misunderstanding on both sides. Ethel Krauze bravely examines it in a painful little story, "Rumbo al Popo" (*Intermedio para mujeres*, Interval for Women, 1982).

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woman protagonist, often in the first person. There are, however, notable exceptions: Josefina Vicens *Los años falsos* (The False Years, 1982) is narrated by an adolescent boy; Aline Petterson's *Proyectos de muerte* (Death Projects, 1983) by a dying man; and Gabriela Rábago Palafox's *Todo ángel es terrible* (Any Angel is Devilish, 1981) by a small boy. María Luisa Puga's first, and best work, *Las posibilidades del odio* (The Possibilities of Hate, 1978) uses a variety of narrators/perspectives to provide a rich and thought provoking set of reactions to colonialism in Kenya.

While most of the women are from the middle and upper-classes and write about that world, here there are also exceptions. Elena Poniatowska seems equally at home writing from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, as from that of a servant. Her novel about the life of Jesusa Palancares, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (Until I see you, my Jesus, 1969) has been very successful, but her lesser-known volume of stories, *De noche vienen* (You come at night, 1979) demonstrates her versatility as a narrator. The title story is a delightful reversal of a common social situation: it deals with a woman bigamist (five times!). But humor as social criticism is quite rare among Mexican women writers; the anguished cry is far more common. One writer who deals exclusively with the marginalized is Cristina Pacheco. With five volumes of short stories published since 1982, her latest, *La última noche del Tigre* (Tiger's Last Night, 1987) demonstrates that she is becoming a very good writer indeed. Her themes are the despairing responses to hunger and deprivation: male violence towards women and children, abandonment, robbery and the consequences of drunkenness.

Several writers are daughters of immigrants, (principally refugees from Europe in the 1930s and 40s); their work reflects this past in a variety of ways. For example, *Las genealogías* (Genealogies, 1981) by Margo Glantz explicitly traces this inheritance. Angelina Muñoz' novels describe the Spain of the Inquisition, painting landscapes of nostalgia, while Esther Seligson's lyrical obsession with mythology and biblical allusion reflect a Jewish intellectual formation, rather than a Catholic one. There is also a small group of Cuban-born writers: Julieta Campos is by far the best-known; others include Livia Sedeño, Aralia López González and the very promising Magaly Martínez Gamba.

#### What They Write

The low productivity of most women writers can be very depressing. For instance, it would delight many an avid fan to see more stories by first-rate Inés Ar-

redondo (*Río subterráneo*; Underground River, 1979), who has only published two volumes, or by Carmen Rosenzweig. Although the versatile Luisa Josefina Hernández is an internationally recognized playwright, her lesser-known novels are also a joy, particularly



Cristina Pacheco. (Photo from Novedades archive)

*Nostalgia de Troya* (Trojan Nostalgia, 1970), one of the most accomplished novels published in Mexico in the past 20 years.

A most striking characteristic of recent women's narrative in Mexico, as compared to its counterparts in Europe, North America or Australia, is the absence of heroines: assertive, self-conscious figures who demand their rights to personal integrity and realization. Mastretta's Catalina in *Arrancame la vida* (Tear Out My Life, 1986) no doubt owes much of her popularity to the refreshing fact that she enjoys life, in contrast to the anguish expressed by most women characters. Yet Catalina is a bought woman, accepting even her lover's murder in order to retain her position and her husband. While many women characters damn their situation by simply describing it, few take the next enormous step and assume responsibility for their own lives, at any

## A PLACE TO START

**Rosario Castellanos:** *Album de familia* (Family Album, 1971, Joaquín Mortiz, México: some of these stories have been translated and published by the University of Texas Press, Austin). A collection of ideologically charged stories about women in Mexico: the new wife; the middle-aged housewife and part time painter; the widowed mother; and the

successful spinster-poet. Painful, ironic stories by a most accomplished writer (and feminist).

**Olga Harmony:** *Los limones* (The lemons, 1984, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa). A barely-known novel tracing the rebellion and ultimate submission of a woman growing up in the 1940's and 50's; a spinster school teacher's story of

her attempts to confront Mexican mores and conventions. A well-written exploration of Mexican society.

**Josefina Vicens:** *Los años falsos* (The False Years, 1982, Martín Casillas, México). A superb, deceptive novela about an adolescent boy's identity crisis, about family, machismo and political and sexual

corruption. A marvelously disturbing book.

**María Luisa Puga:** *Las posibilidades del odio* (The Possibilities of Hate, 1978, Siglo XXI, México). An unusual and fascinating collection of stories—or novel—about Kenya and the nature of colonialism.

cost. Thus, sexual politics are barely confronted, reflecting cultural differences in dealing with male-female relations, in a country that suffers from a colossal Oedipus complex, as Rosario Castellanos put it. Vicens' superb novel, *Los años falsos*, explores aspects of the political, including sexual politics, in such a subtle and skilled way that we are left devastated as much by her portrait of Mexican reality, as by her extraordinary talent as a writer.

Few women write about explicitly political themes. Emma Prieto's *Los testigos* (The Witnesses, 1985)—barely-known, yet convincing and well-written—is the only novel by a woman to examine the consequences of 1968's tragic events in the Plaza of Three Cultures. In a similar vein, *Pánico o peligro* and María Luisa Mendoza's *Con él, conmigo, con nosotros tres* (With Him, With Me,

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With the *Three of Us*, 1971), while not dealing directly with those events, can't be read intelligently without knowing something about them. Mónica Mansour (*Mala Memoria*; Bad memory, 1984) also recalls those times, but among women writers, Elena Poniatowska's chronicle, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Tlatelolco Night, 1971) remains a classic.

One approach to the political, at least in dealing with corruption, is

through the detective story. The *Grande Dame* of the genre in Mexico is María Elvira Bermúdez, now in her seventies. An accomplished writer of other fiction, as well, her latest collection, *Encono de hormigas* (Ant's Revenge, 1987), includes a tender story of an older woman's affair in Rome and an amusing tale of sexual politics, in which a couple exchanges bodies for a week, obliging them to exchange roles as well. Ana María Maqueo has also ventured into this field of political criticism with *Crimen de color oscuro* (Crime of Dark Colour, 1986), and Malú Huacuja has had some success with her first novel (*Crimen sin falta de ortografía*; Crime without Spelling Errors, 1986) in this fairly minor field of Mexican letters.



María Luisa Puga.



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

## CULTURE

Among younger writers, Ethel Krauze has achieved some fame; she dares to break tabus, describing the reactions of her sexually assertive young heroines and writing from the perspective of the young lover of a married man (*Donde las cosas vuelan; Where Things Fly*, 1985). Lesser-known writers of considerable promise include Mónica de Neymet (*Las horas vivas; The Live Hours*, 1985), Rosa Beltrán (*La espera; Waiting*, 1986), Ana Clavel (*Fuera de escena; Offstage*, 1984), Bárbara Jacobs (her latest work is *Escrito en el tiempo; Written in Time*, 1985) and Regina Cohen (*Adentro el fuego; The Fire Within*, 1985).

This brief panorama is intended to whet the appetite. There is much to be learned from women on this side of the border, about differences and about similarities. It is quite astonishing that Mexico, host to the U.N. International Women's Year Congress in 1975, remains almost unknown in the exploding world of women's letters. It is time to demand translations from North American publishers and insist that the "Boom" include the wealth of these women's talents. You will not be disappointed. □