

ONOMATOLOGY IN AÍDA CARTAGENA PORTALATÍN'S FICTION

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Literary works by women authors and about women have become of paramount interest to the critics in the last few decades. The critical approaches to the study of these works have been varied. Few critics have sought, however, to make an onomastic study of women writers. In the case of Hispanic women, the number is even smaller. One contribution of this approach to criticism was presented at a conference on women authors by Grace Álvarez-Altman.¹ In her study she discussed the poetry of Jeannette Miller, a contemporary Dominican author and critic.

Since I have been studying the literature and culture of the Dominican Republic for some time now with increased interest in the women writers, my presentation to you today is of another Dominican author, Aída Cartagena Portalatín. I will discuss the charactonyms of her narrative.

To date, Aída Cartagena holds the highest place in Dominican letters as a contemporary woman author. Not only is she considered one of the best poets, novelists, and short story writers, but she is also an art critic, musicologist and professor of Art History and Civilization at the University of Santo Domingo where she is the editor of the University Annals and coordinator of the Departments of History and Anthropology.

Aída is well versed in the classics, a subject in which she

excelled when she received her doctorate in the Humanities. One appreciates this knowledge further, upon reading the first work I will discuss in this paper: Escalera para Electra (1970). In this novel, the author reveals her profound understanding of Greek literature and myth while simultaneously immersing the reader in a learning process of the Hellenic civilization. The work teaches many other subjects as well, for as the author has stated, "A book should teach something; that is why I get involved in cultural things."²

The title of the novel, Escalera para Electra (A Ladder or Staircase for Electra), predisposes us for the tragedy to come. The name Electra, which means the "unwedded," is the name of the character of several Greek tragedies. Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides all write about the same tragedy. Our author will inform us from the beginning that her Electra is Euripides' Electra. Like him, she will not show compassion for Swain, the author of such a vile crime as is matricide, performed in the name of justice. The staircase from the title will be the scene for the murder. It could also point to Electra's fall to the bottom of society. Yet if we translate the noun in the title as ladder, it could be related to an old proverb "Para llegar al cielo se necesita una escalera larga, larga y otra chiquita" (To reach heaven one needs a long, long ladder and another small one).

Was she really to blame, or was she too as much a victim as the others? When the author writes "It was too late when I realized that Swain waited for Sunday night as one who awaits destiny" (p.35)³ we might think she felt sorry for Swain, thus making the ladder a vehicle to take the character out of the depths of a lowly life.

The novel begins with the act that inspired it—Euripides' play, seen by the author on her trip to Greece. She then recalls another Electra. "Two Electras is too much for one brain. Electra in the land of Agamemnon. It is also the story of a family we know. Electra was born in my town " (p.9). From then on the novel will take on a parallel structure of the rural Dominican tragedy and Euripides' tragedy. Meshed with these will be long deliberations over the art of writing a novel, socio-political problems, the mission of the novelist, Greek art and architecture and morality. The quotes from Euripides' work announce to the reader, much as the Greek chorus did, what will happen next in the rural setting. The author proclaims herself a biographer of Swain. Helene, the name she chooses, will be like Euripides' Helene, a phantom who will see but not be seen and who will narrate in the first person through the memory of events that culminate in the matricide. The chronology of these events is not in linear sequence, obliging the reader to reconstruct the order of the pieces in order to understand the conflict of the characters.

Briefly summarizing the plot, the marriage of Plácido González

to Rosaura suffers the two greatest taboos: adultery and incest. Because of his ill treatment and indifference, Rosaura is unfaithful to her husband with Chano, one of the workers of the plantation. A second son is born to the González, Norberto, Chano's son, who Rosaura pretends is her husband's. When the latter suspects the truth, he takes both boys, the legitimate Ramón Cesar, and the illegitimate Norberto and leaves them with their maternal grandmother. He later kills Chano and forces his wife to have another child he can be sure is his; thus Swain is born.

Over the years the father is able to convince the daughter that her mother is evil. He then establishes an incestuous relationship with his daughter. Rosaura finds out about it through a young boy who is secretly in love with Swain. She swears vengeance and kills Plácido. Then it is Swain who swears to avenge her father's death.

Three years after her husband's death, Rosaura takes on a lover and is about to have his child. Her lover is the town's doctor, Ernesto, who is married to Rose, a frigid American. He loves Rosaura and promises to marry her. Rosaura falls to her death by tripping on a log left on purpose on the stairs. Despite her cries for help, Swain lets her die and then spits on her face. Her brother, Ramón Cesar, who appears to be involved, disappears from the country and Swain winds up in a brothel.

Let us now examine the main characters, taking first the

protagonist, Swain-Electra. All of the descriptions of Swain make her an odious character. We are first introduced to her as "a nightmare, a thing of rare and cursed things. She was everything that wasted away the concept of virginity in my adolescence" (p.8). But it is her name which is the greatest clue to the author's feelings. It was the servant, María Sacramento, the milkman's wife, who made up the name. She always used to make-up words in English and this was one of them. Sacra was working for the Commandant's wife, "la mister," at the time. She was called upon to assist the midwife at the birth of Rosaura's child. When she saw it was a girl, she said "SWAIN" without any meaning attached to the word. However, as it is pronounced phonetically in Spanish it becomes the synonym for pig in English. That girl who was "indifferent, timid and cold" would be capable of incest, of having abortion on abortion (for it seemed she never learned the instructions given to her by the midwife), of later having many lovers and finally winding up in a brothel. The author clearly does not show any compassion for Swain. She doesn't see her as a victim of her father in the case of incest. She summarized with her reflections on the writings of Malinowski and Frazer on the subject.

Swain is a manipulator of men. She doesn't even deserve the relief of death, as received by her father for all the suffering and evil he caused with his life of lechery.

Don Plácido González-Agamemnon, tyrant and lord of the manor,

received his wife's lands through matrimony. He was feared by all. He was a woman-chaser, a drunk and a brute. A son of peasants, he married the wealthy Rosaura for her money. He would spend months without having any intimacy with her. His name belies his character, for Plácido means tranquil, peaceful, gracious. When he was asked for his daughter's hand he responded by shooting at the suitor. He delighted in humiliating the peons and the cook, or beating his wife in front of them. All of these characteristics are listed by psychologists as known factors in incestuous fathers.

Don Plácido's wife or Clytemnestra is the woman whose personality has been stripped from her. She has no identity. In that union, she is only a thing, an object without a name. She is the man's object along with the lands he received from the marriage. It is she who works and is in charge of the peons while he spends the profits. He treats her like the animal whose name he uses to greet her: "arre mulita" (giddieap mule). He despises her as a woman. She is resigned to her suffering in silence, until even her own sex is annulled. Finally, solitude and sensuality bring her to the level of adulteress. Her punishment is to lose her lover and children. She also punished herself, giving up all human rights, even those of her own body. The author makes this passivity stand out by the absence of a name for her other than woman or la doña. It is not until infuriated, by the scene of her naked husband and daughter in the cemetery, that she takes on character, sparked by

her indignation and anger as a woman in defense of her man, which brings her to her fatal end. When her husband is killed we first learn her name: RO SAU RA. Rosaura is a literary name in Dominican Republic. It means soft breeze; peaceful, and figuratively it means general acceptance, applause.

She, who had been like a prisoner, returned to society after twenty years. She began to socialize and make friends, and people began to call her by her name (p.128). She creates a new independence and identity. But she has lost the right to be happy. Even when she is loved by the doctor, it is a forbidden love. Aída analyzes the consequences of passion as described in ancient civilizations: insanity which provokes dead men - homicides, disorders and stupidity. Examples of these are: Medea, Fedra and Dido. "All Euripides' girls, adds Helene, and the pseudo-virgins that take oral contraceptives are victims of passion." The malady was diagnosed in Paradise. First victims: Eve, Adam/Adam,Eve. Therefore we go from Eve to Clytemnestra, Electra, Rosaura, Swain.

The servant Maria Sacramento invokes the powers of God when she senses the tragedy of her mistress. Hilario is taken from the saints' calendar for those born on January fourteenth. He is also hilarious as the comic relief at the moment of impending doom for Rosaura. He is only interested in "doing it" despite his wife's distraught feelings. True to her name, Sacra finally gives in to the right she believes he has through the sacrament of matrimony.

El Gago (stutterer), an attributive name, has this nickname until he leaves the plantation and becomes a policeman. A class distinction seems to be indicated by this change. We learn about him and his past as we are introduced to the character with his real name: Juan Zorilla Y Mendoza. After the grandmother's death, he raises Ramón Cesar, the parallel to Orestes in the Greek tragedy and the eldest of the González's children. Orestes kills his mother at the insistence of Electra to avenge his father. It is not clear, however, in the rural setting if Juan Ramón is the author of the death, or just an accomplice to the crime with Swain. What is clear is that as a result of the death, "They embraced for the first time united" (p. 148).

Chano, Rosaura's lover, has a nickname that comes from either Feliciano, Sebastiano or Luciano, all saints who were martyrs and died by losing their head or some extremity. Chano was killed with a machete, his arm severed from his body, along with great cuts to the head.

Ernesto, a germanic name, is the name of the doctor with whom Rosaura falls in love. True to his name he is ready to go through with his commitment to marry Rosaura, not just because she is carrying his child, but because he loves her in earnest.

There are many names in this novel, place names and names of authors, that might prove to be still another way to approach this most interesting and well-written novel that merited the prize of

Seix Barral of Barcelona.

In the book of short stories Tablero (Checkerboard), 1977, Aida says she chose that title because the stories were not related, but rather isolated moments in history. I choose to see a recurring theme in most of the ones that have Dominican Republic as their background. Specifically, I see the representation of the Dominican as a victim of an imperialist oppressor, the United States, in his own country as well as in the United States.

"Colita", a servant girl in La llamaban Aurora (They called her Dawn), feels exploited by her mistress Sarah, an American who loves to listen to Donna Summer, because after all, that was what blacks were for, to entertain whites. Colita is black and her color is always being thrown up at her by Sarah. She marvels at the intelligence of the servant for being a black girl. "Colita" was the name given to her by her mother. The diminutive "ita", so often used in Hispanic names as a show of affection, has become generalized when used for servants. The noun "cola" means tail or end of something; it is the last place in the line-up of society - a woman and a black one besides. She doesn't accept the new name given to her by Mrs. Sarah - Aurora (Dawn). Inwardly, she would always be "Colita" for how could someone like Mrs. Sarah, who had never seen the dawn, give her such a name?

Sarah, from the Hebrew "Sarai," represents the United States. At first she was a princess of only her own people, but later she

became a princess of the whole world. Sarah, also known as "serarah," means dominion or ruling one. There was no doubt in Colita's mind about Mrs. Sarah's dominion.

Colita decides to leave Mrs. Sarah and runs away with another American family, but this time she lives in New York. She finds, to her chagrin, that she is discriminated there also. She does not understand it. Wasn't she in the land of liberty? Disillusioned, she finally returns to Dominican Republic to once again work for Mrs. Sarah, where she drowns her sobs in the loud music of Donna Summer.

Prebisteria Sánchez is an "Absent" Dominican who returns to her town at Christmas time. Her name has an "s" missing to the frequent aspiration of this sound in the Caribbean Spanish. Prebisteria is a derivative from the Latin presbyterium or function of the Presbyter or priest from the Old Testament. In Greek it is comparable to old or very old. She is now a worshipper of the dollar which has changed her so that she no longer fits in her town. She has even changed her name, calling herself Prebis. She had left her husband and daughter, like so many other Dominican women, to make money in New York. She would go back only to visit. In her absence, her daughter Calandria, or "Lark," becomes an entertainer in a cabaret, her name indicating her profession. When Prebis tries to see her daughter, she can't because that side of the city is closed due to rioting. She returns to the U.S. in the hope the Americans can

restore law and order to her country. When she returns to Dominican Republic she is old and sick from so many hours of overtime in the factory.

Both of these stories show the social and political concerns of the author: the vision of the United States as a promised land in the eyes of the lower class, especially in the eyes of women. With few economic opportunities open for them in their country, they come to the United States as seamstresses or domestics. This is at the expense of leaving husband and family, whom they will support from afar, as well as their husband's other women, who in turn will bear more children for him. Prebis has changed her loyal ties in her absence and now looks to the United States for order. Colita can't accept the United States and prefers to continue to be exploited but in her own environment. She despises what she sees has happened to her country as a result of the American invasion. However, she is guilty of following the new tastes imposed on her society. She does not ask for a fruit punch to quench her thirst, but rather a Pepsi or a Seven-up.

In her short stories the author uses the male character to a minimum and therefore we find few masculine names. Even when one appears it is in a secondary role and generally is presented in a weak or parasitic state, as in "En Off". In "Los Cambios" he doesn't even possess a name, so he is referred to as "him" or "The Other". Since there is an abundance of names from other sources such as the

names of authors of various literatures, recipients of many commentaries by our author, there is still a great deal more to do onomastically with the work of this Dominican author. I hope to continue to bring your attention to more of her work in the future.

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NOTES

¹ Conversation in the Disciplines, A National Conference on 20th-Century Women Writers: From Western New York to the Americas to the World, June 12, 1980.

² As quoted to me in a personal interview, August, 1980.

³ Aída Cartagena Portalatín, Escalera Para Electra, Taller, 1975.

⁴ Ibid., p. 28.