



The Corporeality and Magical Reality of Cuban Women in Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters* (1997)

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Abstract— *The image that every individual holds for his body is a retrospective socially constructed reality. In fiction, however, the body image is to reflect the body shape ideals of society for the consolidation of its perpetual mores in a fictional manner. This fictional image, moreover, is to have an accentuated antinomic representation if blended with elements of magic. The female versions of magical realism, in this sense, try to take advantage of the hyperbole and uncanny in order to transcend their feminine and feminist readings of their reality. This endeavor that is essentially femino-centric, seeks a portrayal of a socially constructed body image and a re-creation of female magic that suggests an alternative feminine corporeality. The present paper aims to deepen a discussion about the magical corporeality of the Cuban women in the work of Cristina García, *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). Through feminist and socio-psychological readings, this article concludes that García makes best use of the magical elements in the portrayal of the Cuban female corporeal ideals that are essentially unrealistic and earthy. The author, in this sense, tries to take advantage of an original and natural magic for pronouncing a social reality, a racial verity, and a cultural veracity.*

Keywords— *Body Image, Corporeality, Cristina García, Magical Feminism, Magical Realism, The Agüero Sisters*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Cuban-American author Cristina García is one of the most recognized Cuban American authors whose literary writings tend to reveal the hidden lacunas of the female Cuban history that has long been characterized with man domination, social disturbance, and political turmoil. All of these conditions attributed to the emergence of a social condition of uncertainty and confusion. García, by means of illustration, was a daughter of a Cuban family that left Cuba in 1960 for a life of exile in the United States after the armed revolt led by Fidel Castro that caused a confiscation of private properties and political upheaval in Cuba.

Cristina was born in Havana, Cuba, on 4 July 1958, the same year that sparked the start of a revolution against the dictatorship of the Cuban president Fulgencio Batista.

Cristina and her family settled in New York City, grew up in the American culture but she never lost her roots and immense love for her country, the matter that makes her stories to be so vivid and close to the Cuban reality. In her writings, Cristina García tends to accentuate the Cuban and the Cuban-American unique experience by focusing on their hyphenated identities torn between the haunted memories of the island, the western world and the newly adopted lifestyle.

The publication of her debut novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) paved the way for a rich and stimulating literary writing career. *Dreaming*, henceforth, has become the “coming of age”, and “one of the best-known Cuban-American works written to date” for both Cuban American literature in particular and Latina/o literature in general (Álvarez Borland 1998, 137). The Time magazine and

Publishers Weekly described this narrative as a captivating piece of writing due to its capabilities in improvising the story of living between two cultures. In fact, all of García's works are based on the idea of acculturation, significantly departing from "Dreams and imagination". *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), which is García's second narrative, resembles its predecessor in demonstrating the complexity of the Cuban American social and cultural experience, besides the political circumstances that created the possibility of exile.

II. THE AGÜERO SISTERS AND THE ANTINOMIC REALITY

The Agüero Sisters is, remarkably, full of binaries that are present throughout the novel, through a feminist standing point. Like *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters* is marked by a two-fold estrangement, from the writer's native Cuba and the Cuban American community. Yet, the construction of difference, as Stevenson explained, is found not only at the geographical level only. That is true, as there is an essential time-space conception that is based on the representation of the land of origin or the new place of exile versus the time bond that is framed for the irrational. Notwithstanding, the narrative extends this unexplained twist to a well scrutinized set of dichotomizing Latino / Anglo American, body / soul, and past / present relationships (146). In this vein, Alejandra Bronfman in *The Washington Times* (25 May 1997) reviewed:

The story of the convergence of all these characters, as they zero in on Miami and on their shared past, is told in many registers, and the novelist's deft manoeuvres through them reveal a brilliant send of narrative. She moves seamlessly from the subtle ambiguities of emotion to Miami's raucous absurdity and overabundance, surprising us with lively satire.

Indeed, as there is a wealth of satire, ironies, magical and mystical significance in her works, García is an accredited magical realist. The inclusion of the magical elements is to underscore and to understand the very nature of the human perception of reality and the use of magical real technique is to accentuate the existing binaries not to contradict them with the creation of an irrational world. In this context, Luis Leal (2017, p. 121-122) claims that magic realist authors, like García, do not "distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; [...] the principal thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances".

Another important point to highlight, at this level, is that García tends primarily to heighten the feminist reality by focusing on the relationship between the Cuban woman and her social conditions in a marvelous juxtaposition of realities and possibilities through the display of magic. The organic nature of the oxymoronic magical realism that deals essentially with the real in a marvelous real is believed to be the best suiting the mode of expression for contradictions and volatilities of the exotic Latina vis a vis the Western woman as a manifestation of difference.

III. GARCÍA'S FEMINO-CENTRIC NARRATIVE

García's second novel, *The Agüero*, like its predecessor, focuses on female characters that look for their existing both in their homeland and in exile. These emotional instabilities felt by characters in both novels led to the rise of nostalgic emotions demonstrated by the author as various illnesses imposed on the characters who keep moving back and forth between island and mainland, home and exile, memories and dreams in a well-structured binary novel.

Reina and Constancia are the Agüero Cuban sisters that have been separated for thirty years by familial loyalties, and later by political issues preceding the rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba. The two sisters are quite different, as they are modelled by their childhood and haunted by the memories of their father and their deceased mother. The story opens with a murder committed by the father Ignacio Agüero, a famous ornithologist. Ignacio killed his wife Blanca with a double-barreled gun, the fact that kept secret, yet confessed only to his diary. He killed himself shortly after.

The novel bounces back and forth among the sisters, in an outstanding journey for reconciliation of both personal and national history. Constancia, the elder sister, chose to leave Cuba at the outset of Castro's revolution to the United States, where her husband, Heberto, sells the finest yet illegal cigars to his best customers. Reina, however, the half-sister of Constancia, is the offspring of Blanca's affair with a mulatto. Reina works as a talented electrician in Castro's Cuba, and remains fiercely loyal to the memories of her parents. She is described as a dark, sensual and a beautiful member of the revolution, before being struck by lightning while she was repairing a high-voltage cable; this accident unsettled her life. Consequently, she decided to join her sister in Miami. Furthermore, their meeting created a series of divisions that were apparent in their quest for truth.

IV. THE CUBAN FEMININITY AND BODY IMAGE

Throughout the above briefly summarized story of *The Agüero*, it is clear that the author tends to show the social feminist consciousness, through which she seeks the revelation of the silenced history of the Cubanas. It should come as no surprise for García as a female Latin-American author, whose origins are deeply rooted in an empowered male society, to take advantage of the magical feminism. Feminist discourse, in this vein, is the outreached voice of liberation that transcends the Cuban social reality of inequity and gender inequality. The use of magic namely through exaggeration and imagination to portray the feminist reality is what Patricia Hart (1989) referred to as *Magical Feminism*. Hart defines *Magical Feminism* as, “magical realism employed in a femino-centric work” (p.30). Noticeably, the magical story of the Agüero sisters, as the novel’s title suggests, is all about the two estranged female Cubans who struggled through the experience of a divided family that is in essence a mere reflection of Cuba division of pro/against Castro’s revolution. García, moreover, has given a quite clear synthesis of the modern history of Cuban womanhood that is defined essentially by body image.

4.1 Body Shape Ideals of Constancia

Constancia and Reina took two intersectional destinies for the rediscovery of their female Cuban reality that their shattered selves try to portray. Constancia’s story starts with her departure from Cuba during the first two years of Castro’s regime, “No, Constancia thinks, she could not have been happy in Cuba after 1959” (García, 2007, p.48). When arriving the U.S, Constancia could perfectly relate to the western life and culture as she shares quite similar mental, moral, and physical qualities of the American counterparts. As per character, she shows unique “Puritan”-like attitudes that permitted her to create her own business. In accordance to her discipline, the pale and very petite Cuban emigrant also proves to have similar physical characteristics to that of the western women, which essentially contradict the Cuban femininity. Constancia’s body resembles to a good extent the outer features of the desexualized white women who are described by García as “breastless and hipless mannequins” (Ibid, p.61).

For Veronica Popescu (2017), Constancia “[...] is very correct in appearance and speech, she is very hard-working and precise, with ‘a low threshold for disorder’” (p.165). Such characteristics helped Constancia be a successful person, “she excels as a businesswoman, selling expensive cosmetics at a ritzy department store” (García, 2007, p.87). Fancy beauty products are another means through which the Cuban woman manifests her obsession with body and face treatment for the eventual optimal result of obtaining

an acceptable body image. Despite the fulfilled life she enjoyed when leaving Cuba, her past has decisively overlaps her life in Miami in an extreme magical way as she has experienced a marvellous substantial morphosis that ends up in face “invent[ing] the architecture of her face” (García, 2007, p.104). When she woke up, she figured out that her face was replaced with her mother’s, “she rubs her eyes, pinches her cheeks. Her eyes seem rounder, a more deliberate green. Then it hits her with the force of a slap. This is her mother’s face”. This incident made radical changes not only on her outer look but also on her belief agenda. Eventually, the transformed facial image of Constancia was to remind her of her past that she had simply left behind exactly as her real face did.

On the racial perception of women, Stevenson accredits Claudette M. Williams’s study that highlights the main prominent corporeal difference between white and dark-skinned women that the Agüero sisters come to embody. Following this line, Williams states that, “Implied in this construction of race is the desexualisation of white women that Romantic literary discourse had engendered [...] the fiery sensuality of the ‘dark woman’ depended for its expression on the contrasting coldness of the ‘fair lady’ ” (qtd. In Stevenson 147). García, in this respect, constructs a solid background for the reader’s understanding of body image in accordance to race conception. Constancia has permeated roots in Cuba but has different corporeal features, the matter that excludes her from the Cubanas circle. Yet unlike Constancia, Reina is fully privileged with ‘the fiery sensuality of the ‘dark woman’ that is identified essentially as an exotic beauty.

4.2 The Exotized and Idealized Reina Agüero

Unlike her elder sister, Reina is a vibrant, tall and dark-skinned girl with an endowed magnetic appearance. Her hourglass body is ideally the exotic shape that the author stresses its magic to represent the Cuban feminine archetype. García reveals some details about Reina’s character and physique,

Reina is detrenched, and her jumpsuit clings to her still-curvaceous form. She is forty-eight years old, but her body appears many years younger. She ignores the men who linger behind her, mesmerised by the size and swing of her buttocks. (García, 2007, p. 10)

Essentially, Reina’s recognition and praise of her body image and femininity was not possible during the revolutionary Cuba, as she was preoccupied with the politics’ ethos over her own life. It was not until she decided to detach herself from the depleting revolution that she could eventually feel privileged over her sister and her sisters’ counterparts.

The Amazonian woman kept loyal to the revolution and stayed in Cuba as a strong adherent of El Líder, working for the revolution as a government electrician. Yet her faithful socio-political beliefs were doomed to refusal shortly after, as she witnessed a near-death experience of an electric shock that left deep psychological and physiological scares. García describes the incident in a magically minutes way,

The doctors tell her that she is lucky to have survived a direct hit of lightning in the mahogany tree. Already they've scraped acres of cinereous flesh from her back, charred a foreign gray. The tools on her belt branded their silhouettes on her hips. Her hoop earrings burned holes in her neck. For weeks, her pores oozed water and blood, until Reina thought it might be better to die. (García, 1997, p.35)

When arriving to Miami, Reina was astonished at the Miamian and Cuban-Miamian women who had different interpretation of reality as body shape is concerned. Unlike the Cuban Reina, the Cuban women in Miami have come to be much more westerners than Latinos. They are obsessed with their body image and outer appearance, yet they are characterized as the "Other". García says, "Reina is perplexed by the obsession women in Miami have for the insignificant details of their bodies, by their self-defeating crusades. All those hipless, breastless mannequins, up to their scrawny necks in silk. Don't women understand that their peculiarities are what endear them to men?" (García, 1997, 161). Indeed, the original and natural beauty of Reina, whose body image is not on the top of her priorities, is what seduces men and induced women's jealousy as whenever she is out "people watch her, whisper, point behind her back [...] Constancia's female acquaintances have pleaded with her to keep Reina under lock and key. We have enough trouble keeping our husbands in line without your sister coming around like temptation incarnate" (Ibid, p.172). According to women's confessions, a wave of nostalgia swept over men in Miami who were mesmerized by the lure of the Cuban female irresistible body that is portrayed in the novel as simultaneously real and magical.

The depiction of the natural exotic female in the novel could also be regarded as a negative reference to the Afro-Cuban woman who is perceived by the western world as a negative model of the primitive nature of the sexualized Cubana. On this matter Pascha Stevenson (2007, p. 147) talks about García's representation of the mulata Reina, he holds "García's depiction of Reina is largely sympathetic [...] She is the classic exotic type, embodying the very heart of wild, untamed Cuba, something to which García's nostalgic Miami exiles are uncontrollably drawn".

Notwithstanding, the validity of this analysis may not be totally credible as García tries to give a wide array of describing the Cuban female in the character of the mulata Reina and the hybrid Cuban-American Constancia.

The projection of the Cuban female experience in the narrative of García is aimed at accentuating the organic magic that features the Cubana natural corporeal treats. At this level, we can say that García's Magical techniques used in *The Agüero* are to reveal the storylines of the Cuban women in and out of the island. However, García's magic is not to create imaginary possibilities or hard to believe certainties but to recreate reality and uncover the magical physical and nonphysical realms of the Cubanas reality. Accordingly, the demonstration of the body image, which is an essential part of femininity, is to focus on the socially constructed ideals of an ideal body shape that would be accredited and recognized by both genders in a given society. García's description of the two sisters' body forms and physical changes is a free ticket for a good understanding of the important role that body image could play under any pretext.

In the aim of representing the womanhood of the main female characters of Constancia and Reina, García here wants to delineate the socially constructed ideals in revolutionary Cuba as the feminist perspective and the feminist perception are concerned. On this point, the author accentuates two female realities, one of those adherents of the revolution and loyal to their island who have managed to maintain their biological features and the lineaments of the Cuban originality. And the other of those who were not in alignment with the Cuban political doctrine and, hence, chose to change their lives and identities to have their bodies, ultimately, falling into the same new order.

Continuing on this line, the representation of the social experience of the two characters stresses the magic that for the author is an essential part of the Cuban story, the fact that makes Reina and Constancia magical feminists. Accordingly, the female magical experience could perfectly fall into Patricia Hart's 'magical feminism' that is defined as "magical realism employed in a femino-centric work." (Hart, 1989, 30). This proves García's crucial use of reality that is magically described within a feminist context. Eventually, we can say that notwithstanding the assumed ambiguities about magical realism, García has successfully managed to get out of the exaggerated version of magic to a natural way of advancing her characters' magic corporeality.

V. CONCLUSION

The Agüero Sisters is a magical yet real narrative of womanhood that highlights the social and psychological state of La Cubana, and it does so by exploiting the discrepancy inherent to magic realism. Apparently, García provides a complex modern perspective of the womanhood that have been challenged throughout the history of the island. She draws a magnificent picture for the political, historical, and social states of Cubans who went through tough times during and after the waning years of the revolution. Those manifested events set the ground and form the backdrop for the female characters who were in search for their real place, their unforgettable history, culture and national memory. As a matter of fact, the Agüero sisters come to incarnate females' beliefs and convictions about the ill constructed social values and ideals through body image translation. Ultimately, we can say that Constancia and Reina hold widely differing ways of visualizing, perceiving, and believing in their body image and that their both satisfaction and dissatisfaction is essentially related to the socio-political spectrum as magic tries to demonstrate.

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