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No laughing matter. The women of *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*.

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To deconstruct a text is to open it to new interpretations, to read it and to elicit from it new understandings, new clues on the ideology which underpins it. To do that, one must focus on that elusive discourse that on one hand creates the literary subject, and on the other, allows the reader a chance to pinpoint how the text implicitly undermines its own ideology. Our case in point is Vargas Llosa's *Pantaleón y la visitadoras* (1973).

Many critics address this novel as a political satire of the Peruvian military, each however has further particular views about it. For Castro-Klaren, *Pantaleón* is the embodiment of a good-natured humor, a descriptive humor of the life of a Peruvian *huachafó* (an arriviste, phony Peruvian), namely Pantaleón Pantoja. For her, this work is nothing but the life of a *huachafó* trying not to be himself (136-48). Similar conclusions are seen in Dick Gerdes' article where he finds it worthwhile to point out that the worth of this novel is seen in the "mirth-provoking" and "jocular feat" brought on by non-white Peruvians mishandling the Spanish language (114-29). Others even find worthwhile to look into the enumeration of chapters and pages as the conveyors of meaning (Williams 76-87). As shown above, if missing the essence of the text was not the purpose, one must perplexedly admire how this task was perfectly achieved. There is humor, but at what cost? The price is the formulaic misrepresentation of women.¹

I am not interested in the satire of the military as much as in the male-centered subtext within the narrative. As said before, what matters is how the literary discourse is presented, how this discourse reflects the logocentrism that underpins it, how the characters are built, especially how the female characters are given specific characteristics and how they are the entities that embody and reflect the ideology that has produced them. I concentrate my efforts on the dichotomies of the signifiers embedded within the narrative; they are a reflection of an ideological posi-

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tion and show the preeminence of the social referent that gives the frame of reality and adds the humor to the text.

For Derrida the written text bears in its essence that inescapable dichotomy of its claims, as it portrays itself to be truthful and wholesome yet showing within itself those contradictory dichotomies that undermine its own postulates (213-229). He points out that Western philosophy has given birth to this system of thinking that constructs reality through binary opposite semantics, usually belonging to mutually exclusive categories.² It is one of those categories, namely absence/presence, which mirrors those manicheist concepts prevalent in the western world, e.g. good/bad, white/black, conscious/unconscious, among others. In the west, social practice has provided privileges to the parts of the speech that have positive connotations. For instance, *presence* is equated with good, white, men, conscious and so on. Obviously the opposite negative terms are connected as necessary: *absence* is equal to bad, black, women and unconscious. In *Pantaleón*, the women are in the margin of the text; they are powerless bearing the stigma of the negative dichotomies yet their position in the narrative allows us to study how their characters are built. They are the opposite end of the norm, the embodiment of what underpins European logocentrism, namely the rational and the proper. It is always other characters who speak for them, other characters who characterize, admire, hope and enjoy the features assigned to such women. And of course, it is Pantaleón Pantoja, the ubiquitous colonial master, who organizes them.

The story tells of an efficient army officer sent to the tropical city of Iquitos to organize sexual services to the army bases in the region. Of course, he is chosen since his record is impeccable; he does finish and accomplish his given tasks, although sometimes he becomes overzealous while doing his job. He hails from the coastal region of the country as do his wife and his mother. He brings that rationality to the land of the wild Amazons, as he runs the most successful mobile brothel in the region. He could be described as a positivist officer, he does what is required and necessary. His wife is, however, more interesting for our purposes. Her character provides a far more revealing insight of the narrative. Curiously enough, the ideology of the marginal text in the narrative is filtered out through the discourse of Pantaleón's wife.

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Pochita, she herself a woman from the coast, writes letters to her sister back home. In the letters she lets her sister know about her difficulties of living in the tropical city, especially her fear of the sexual behavior of the local women. She complains, among other things, of the voracious (sexual) disposition of these women. They are some “bandidas,” she tells her sister, alluding to the *loretanas* an unrestrained love for sex, a vice that obviously does not respect the good customs of decent people of Perú.³ These women are so good at corrupting men that they can take a husband away before his wife would notice; in the tropics, one understands, the degree of degradation is such that even the women who are not whores, are willing to become one (77-79). Of course, in the same letters, Pochita describes how real such behavior is since women even knock on people’s doors in search of business. Pochita adds that it is even difficult to distinguish between “normal” women in the tropics and the prostitutes that knock on the door to offer their services; after all, Pochita had put a wanted sign on her door in need of a wash woman (*lavandera*) and all she got was a prostitute trying to charge her double because the latter did not usually do business with women. The *lavanderas* the text goes, are the euphemisms for prostitutes. It does not matter what they are called, what matters is their literary presence i.e., their “unnatural” sexuality. In this way, the essence of the tropical women is foregrounded. The *loretanas* are simply creatures of vice.

Sometimes these women not only take “your husband away,” they can easily cause the death of one man or two. It is normal for these women to grow into being natural seductresses. A man describes how evil yet how natural is the sexuality of such women, since as soon as they grow those “tetitas” and the “magnífico culo” they have men succumbing to them to the point of death (115). The star of the brothel, for instance, was believed to have caused the death of at least two men, one a priest, who committed suicide due to her emotional use of him. One can see how those described situations may cause amusement for some readers, after all, the language in the text is recognizably funny. I will go back to the issue of humor later. The task at the moment is to show how these women characters are built since it is obvious that the main narrative is about Pantaleón and his job, not the *objective* observation of his wife. She is, in fact, unaware for much of the story, of her husband’s activities.

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The misrepresentation of women in *Pantaleón* is not only a literary exercise but also reflects the larger spectrum of patriarchal Peru. Literature has been a faithful sidekick in the reinforcement of this ideology. Pam Morris points out that in literature, the misrepresentation of women has been one of the traditional means by which men have justified their subordination of women wherein men's writings supposedly had reflected the life of women outside the text. Since men's view of women had been prevalent in society, the representation of women has been seen as *truthful* as in the formulaic woman like the seductress (33). Men, as a consequence, were believed to be the ones in charge of taming those wild drives of women. As one sees in the story, a man like Pantaleón must organize those "destructive" drives of women into a systemic paradox: the brothel. Morris also clarifies that in literature, as it is in real life, man is always seen as creative, with knowledge (the eternal positivist), always with women having to depend on them, usually in the institution of marriage where the women's role implies chastity and submissiveness (34). In the narrative, if the sexual drive of women must be suppressed, either by organizing them in brothels or marrying them, it is always a man who is the middleman.

The prostitutes, as said before, are juxtaposed to the good women from the coast (supposedly for European eyes, the most "civilized" region of Perú). The kernel of such differentiation is such that not only is there an unrestrained emphasis on the negative hyper-sexuality of the women of the tropics, but an overemphasis on the goodness of married Pochita, the woman of the coast. Of course, there is always the danger of women falling sideways. The temptation is always there. It is not surprising that such ideological tenets surface continually in *Pantaleón*; the women of the coast after all are different (that is, good), like *Pantaleón*'s mother. She however falls for the pagan tenets of a pagan movement and becomes the epitome of irrationality (240).

Sensual tropical women, it is said, cannot change their recognizable persona. Even when a prostitute tells her story it is not to repent, to change her lifestyle or to offer something positive for her life, it is simply to reaffirm her commitment to her "chosen" life. Maclovia, one of the prostitutes who used to work for *Pantaleón*, writes a letter to Pochita so she can intercede with her husband and get her job back. She had been fired because she had fallen in love and had to leave the crews of the

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brothel. She wants to come back to the brothel, and according to the letter (that speaks for her) she loves her job so much that she would pray with “*toda devoción*” so that her wish could be fulfilled (176). In the text, somehow, this oversexed woman is allowed to speak and to reaffirm the discourse that has given life to her since the meaning of her letter only makes sense insofar as the reader partakes in such cultural assumptions about the women of the tropics. Like Maclovia, not one loretana in the narrative has any positive traits and no other woman character is redeemed, since there is no qualitative change in their behavior. They are always depicted according to what provides their intrinsic being: the stereotype.⁴ Women are often a game in this type of narrative. The latter, of course, has had a long history in Latin American literature, not only with women but also with the quintessential Other: the Indian.

For Mason, who has studied the epistemology of the literary representation of the Indian, the colonial discourse in the new world has had one foundational particularity over the subject under its focus. It has created a reality of it and about it, and more importantly, this discourse has had that capacity to claim an epistemological *truth* about the subject (14-15). He contends that to challenge this socio-historical construct, one must “dissolve the opposition” between reality and imagination, by accepting the fact that this reality at least, was constructed through a very active imagination (18). As Derrida points out, the preeminent discourse usually constructs the subject by assigning to it a lacking characteristic that logically is representative of the ontologically opposite end. The figure goes as follows: not that A is not B, what matters for our case is that A can only be A, always opposite to B. So the women from the “civilized” coastal region can never be tropical women, i.e., promiscuous and libertine; in the same manner European man is what the Indian is not: rational, normal, chaste, and so forth. In regards to geography, the wild women inhabit the tropics, the antithesis of “normal” coastal Perú. Obviously there is a disturbing agenda in the subtext of the narrative and somehow this discourse about tropical women has created a tangible reality, not just in the text but, as one sees below, when humor is addressed in a cultural context.

The representation of these women falls within the systemic political tabulation of sex in the Peruvian tropics, and, by extension, the larger Peruvian society and the even larger Latin American social spec-

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trum as well.⁵ Furthermore, sex as a social phenomenon, goes beyond literature. Foucault points out the relationships between political power and sex. Power, in our case, would be the epiphenomenon of the logos that gives meaning to the social referent that in its turn validates the humor in *Pantaleón* where the discursive political structures are always present. The “insistence of the law” for dealing with sex falls in that binary approach: sex is “licit” or “illicit and “permitted or forbidden” where such manicheism is supported by the discourse which logically embodies the desire of the political power that produces it (Foucault 83). Of course, in the linking of signifiers in our case, the illicitness and the forbidden particularities must be imposed upon the loretanas to whom the law (i.e. the literary tradition) applies. It would not make sense to link semantically in our case illicit, hot, tropical, evil, ready and all-powerful sex with a woman of the coast of Perú. The joke would not work because the coast is supposedly European, white, rational, chaste and proper. Yet it is logical, natural and in all humor accepted that the loretana must be what the stereotype says she is.

For Foucault, in the Western tradition, the practice of sex can only be done through the ample mantle of power, which is institutionalized in such covenants such as marriage and where all sex outside it must be negative in all its connotations (103-104). Of course the bearer of tradition, i.e., the object of the law (a wife) can only mirror the ideas of this ideology where sex should only be good under marriage; sex, if practiced by outsiders to marriage, is not only outlawed (embodiment of the other) but evil, applicable in its practice to malignant entities, not to “normal” people. “Normal” people marry, produce offspring and behave as prescribed by the essence of the antithesis of abnormality. This is sex as a tool (prostitution), sex as evil (tropical sex) and sex as conducive to death (as opposed to “normal sex” within marriage that is conducive to reproduction). Against the backdrop of the lavanderas, there is Pochita, the one who pens the life of the other women and who, under only lawful sex i.e., marriage, procreates.

Pochita resembles those early Spanish chroniclers like Oviedo (Mason 56) and the conquistador Cortés, specifically when the latter writes his Second Letter to the Spanish emperor. ⁶ Posing as a meek observer of the wanton behavior of the Indian (men and women alike), he “discovers” with so fitting horror the Indian’s vile inhumanity. Cortés, among

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others, would set up the social and political referent with respect to the Indian, so does Pochita (and she is a fictional character) with respect to this text; yet the convenient presence of the Other is undifferentiated.

This normative thinking about the Indian is not new, and it appeared on these shores when the Europeans arrived. Indians were found to be the opposite to the norm, biologically and spiritually. As one notices in *Pantaleón* the discourse of today still reflects the discourse of those early days about the Indian wherein the social practices of the latter were connotatively relevant: be it “sodomy,” “bestiality” and of course “polygamy” (Mason 57). These signifiers have *presence* when juxtaposed to the word Indian; and these connotations with a subject and a discursive center have been the norm since the Spanish conquest until contemporary times. Of course, echoing Derrida, the connotation of the signifiers about the Indians are multiplied endlessly and applied to subjects believed to bear similar traits to the Indians.

In *Pantaleón*, Porfirio Wong, a Chinese Peruvian, is also the subject of this discursive construct. Wong (another marginal element) is not just a pimp, he is good at what he does (of course any body who knows Peruvian culture will not laugh about this representation). He, of course, is *allowed* to center himself as a person, to indicate his essence as a human being: “Chino que nace pobletón, muele café o ladrón” (32). Wong’s alterity not only is cultural but biological since it was his mother who had prognosticated his future as a person. The evidence of this “reality” that supports this discourse is the Chinese ethnicity, and in the women, their biological attributes. We learn that tropical women are sexually promiscuous since they are biologically given to seduction: “caderas y senos” are “generosos” in those lands (47). According to a male voice in the narrative, women like excessive sex. Such as Luisa Cánepa, for instance. She was raped and, as expected, “la cosa le gustó” and she became prostitute (15). One must remember all of these issues when we are supposedly reading a satire about the Peruvian military.

If the tropical women cannot dominate their natural drives, of course they cannot dominate their spiritual side, thus their estrangement from the norm is expected. Around Iquitos, there is a pagan movement whose members among other things, practice the drinking of blood and, as expected, the sacrifice of animals. In the beginning, only animals are the victims, but the members of the sect end up sacrificing a child. Natu-

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rally, among the members of the sect, women, especially the prostitutes, are the most fanatic (288). It is only fitting that the visitadoras would feel attracted to such movement. In fact, it is symbolically revealing that when the “star” of the brothel dies, she is buried with all the honors of the pagan movement (249). The discourses of paganism and sexuality coalesce at the funeral, like the fulfillment of the long desire of the colonial and patriarchal ideology prevalent in the narrative.

In the Western tradition, the Other has been “objectively” considered a lesser being with described low intellectual faculties and with an appalling unrestrained animality. In colonial societies, the fantasies embodied in the law of the colonizers were applied with unrestrained overzealousness whose subject of praxis was the devaluated being, namely women and Indians. In independent times, the representation of the Indian has somehow subsided, although the connotation of a lesser being still persists. The Other had the worth of a child, he was less than fully human, and the goal of governments, at least in the spirit of the law, was to bring colonial subjects out of the “state of barbarism... and thus elevate them in the scale of humanity” (Wallace 174). This objective, of course, implied a forced action to get the native out of his “savage ways,” with the unstated, long-term goal of total political domination.

The hierarchies of meaning assigned to women and Indians have been embedded in the legal and social referent that has supported these assertions. Similar to the colonial era, in independent times the literary referent has been provided with an ideological discursive base upon which the vision of the Other has been constructed. Naturally any literary view had to reflect the social reality where it was produced.⁷ The problem has been that in Latin America the literary referent has given birth to the political praxis in independent times, and the discourse that created the Indians as literary characters has persisted until today. The ideology of this referent, of course, found the Indian alien to the Euro-centric recipes about politics thus modern discourse could not deal with the Indian in a different way than the colonial discourse. The colonial subject had to be different, it had to be the emblem of what European civilized man was not. The Indian of Cortés’ letters is the woman of *Pantaleón*. It is what made the Other different which effectively brought on the desire of the colonial power to establish boundaries of recognized behavior.

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The Other historically and spiritually had to be visible, i.e., real. The goal was to make the separation of *them and us* tangible and believable (Bhabha 170). In the colonial experience, the native was not only different, he needed to be “guided” since he simply could not control himself and be permitted to practice his *own* wild ways. The idea was to impose a program of improvement, of “amelioration” of these practices, i.e., the white man’s burden (Bhabha 171). In *Pantaleón*, the positivist behavior of Pantaleón (showing his know-how) is quickly profitable due to the raw sexuality (untamed) he finds in the tropics. He manages the wild sexuality into a pattern of consumption, although more specifically to channel the intrinsic nature of these women. So when women hear that there are four vacancies in the brothel, the women are overeager to compete for such jobs. They appear like “moscas” coming out “de todos los barrios” (141). The women of the tropics can only fit and fulfill the role that colonial instrument (Pantaleón) had assigned to them.

Pantaleón is indeed a humorous novel. The problem is the cost of eliciting such delight, since most humor is relative and it makes sense (produces mirth) insofar as the relative context within it is done (Palmer 20). It may have to do with the relationship between reader and the political and literary referent under which the reading is done. In Perú reigns a state of organized patriarchal ideology, that with the avail of church and state have rendered women totally helpless as citizens; the situation of women has mirrored the situation of the Indian, both dominated by a political establishment ruled by no Indian and until recently no women. The Indian and women suffer the institutionalized demeaning desire that have constructed them, either in literature and as political subjects, as lesser beings apt to misrepresentation and domination.

Palmer points out that the listener to a joke (in our case the reader to the text) must have prior knowledge about the subtleties of the message, the joke or the story being presented, otherwise an explanation after the enunciation would simply destroy the humor (149). Clearly this implies that if the reader partakes in such humor, he or she must know or be part and aware of the idiosyncrasies of the culture in which such discourse makes sense. As Palmer asks: “is funniness a feature of what is laughed at, or is it a feature of the mind of the perceiver?” (93). I believe it is both. First, because the former is the constructed object of literature and second, since the latter is the reflection of the logocentric beliefs

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which underpin such mirth. And so we, the readers, laugh; one must admit, the story elicits laughter and so one arrives to the question: why is this effected Other laughable?

The Other is laughable due to the predisposition of the reader towards the discourse in the text. If the text elicits laughter then the audience must feel one feature indispensable for such feeling, i.e., the already internalized “audience’s moral superiority” to what is presented in the story (Palmer 148). Surely in *Pantaleón* one must laugh accordingly if one considers this novel to be a satire of the Peruvian military, since it is “common knowledge,” although an untested fact, that the army is inefficient and has misdirected goals. Yet, for the same reasons, why would the same readership find comical the use of a discourse that renders women as laughable beings? Is it superiority again on the part of the reader? Is it cultural? Whatever it is, *Pantaleón* is a clear case of a literary praxis where the literary discourse has reproduced, at least in this story, a conspicuous being.

Unfortunately this misrepresentation of women which elicits laughter is the internalized acceptance of the reality constructed by the dichotomies as pointed out above by Derrida. In the novel, Pantaleón returns home. Naturally order and progress must suffer. The rational mind that tamed the tropics, at least for a while, is gone. The women simply go back to their irregular and unorganized sexual activities. The wild, in the absence of *progress*, takes back its own.

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Notes

- ¹ In Orientalist discourse women are also a clear example of the embodiment of the Other, bearing characteristics attributed to the marginal elements in society. They are usually the objects of “male power-fantasy.” See Said 207.
- ² The philosophical background behind this thinking is found in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass ed.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 79-153.
- ³ Iquitos is a city in the eastern part of Perú. The region is tropical. Iquitos is within the Loreto’s department, hence loretanas. The racial make up of the region is mainly Indian and mixed raced. In Peruvian popular culture, women from the region are supposedly to be very active sexually. Of course, this is a stereotype, usually the charm of street-corner adolescent men.

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- ⁴ Franco points out that there is a pattern of misrepresentation of women in Latin American literature where women are usually the objects of men's desires. In this context, there is a "fixed territory" for the representation of women delimited by reproductive roles and passive behavior. See "Self-Destructing Heroines." *Twentieth-Century Spanish American Literature since 1960*. David W. Foster and Daniel Altamiranda ed. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997. 269-279.
- ⁵ The situation of Peruvian women, like their other Latin American counterpart is deplorable. Their oppression by the political system is multidimensional, it is political, economic and sexual. See Ofelia Schutte 215-226.
- ⁶ Hernán Cortés writes to his emperor about the "truthful nature" of the Aztecs, which he finds addicts to unnatural practices; the Aztecs were simply addicts to paganism, sodomy and cannibalism. See his *Cartas de Relación* 23, 32, 52-55.
- ⁷ After independence, writers in Latin America cling to European tropes and inspiration while practicing their craft. In the European view, the native (of either genre), human and otherwise, was always the subject on which those old exotic labels were applied. For more information see Pupo-Walker's "The brief narrative in Spanish America 1835-1915." *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature. Vol. I* Ed. Roberto Gonzales Echevarria and Enrique Pupo-Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 490-535.

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