

El árbol: The Tree as Metaphor in the Works of Bombal and Garro

El árbol: A Árvore como metáfora nos trabalhos de Bombal e Garro

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Abstract

Some critics have described the writings of María Luisa Bombal and Elena Garro's as an early example of Latin American feminist writing. Their protagonists are women living and suffering in a patriarchal society. But as critic Ronald De Feo in "The Beginnings Of Latin Baroque" says about Bombal and this applies to Garro as well: ". . . read solely on a social level, her work seems simplistic and repetitious. One misses the elements that make her fiction distinctive—the terse yet poetic prose . . . the frequent use of natural elements to evoke interior moods." (12). It is these features of their work, the feminine aspect and in particular the tree as metaphor that we focus on in our paper as we analyze María Luisa Bombal's and Elena Garro's stories, both titled "The Tree". The tree in these stories is an external symbol that functions on several levels: the elements of earth, wind, water, fire and humanness that reveal or describe the protagonist's mental state.

Key words: Latin American feminist writing, María Luisa Bombal and Elena Garro, tree.

Resumo

Alguns críticos descrevem as narrativas de María Luisa Bombal e Elena Garro como um exemplo remoto de escritura feminista latino americana. Suas protagonistas são mulheres que vivem e sofrem numa sociedade patriarcal. Mas, como afirma o crítico Ronald De Feo sobre Bombal no artigo "The Beginnings of Latin Baroque" que se aplica também a Garro: "[...] ler o seu trabalho apenas num nível social parece simplista e repetitivo. Perde-se os elementos que fazem sua ficção distinta – a prosa concisa, porém poética [...] o uso freqüente de elementos naturais para evocar humores interiores." (12). São estes aspectos do trabalho das duas escritoras, o aspecto feminino, e, em particular, a árvore como metáfora que nós enfocamos no nosso artigo ao analisarmos as histórias de María Luisa Bombal e Elena Garro, ambas intituladas "A Árvore". A árvore nessas histórias é um símbolo externo que funciona em vários níveis: os elementos da terra, vento, água, fogo e a humanidade que revelam ou descrevem o estado mental da protagonista.

Palavras-chave: Escritoras feministas latino americanas, María Bombal e Elena Garro, árvore.

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Some critics have described the writings of María Luisa Bombal and Elena Garro as an early example of Latin American feminist writing. Their protagonists are women living and suffering in a patriarchal society. But as critic Ronald De Feo in "The Beginnings of Latin Baroque" says about Bombal and this applies to Garro as well: "... read solely on a social level, her work seems simplistic and repetitious. One misses the elements that make her fiction distinctive. . . the terse yet poetic prose. . . the frequent use of natural elements to evoke interior moods." (Feo 12). It is these features of their work, the feminine aspect and in particular the tree as metaphor that we focus on our paper as we analyze María Luisa Bombal and Elena Garro's stories both titled "El árbol", "The Tree".

The tree in these stories is an external symbol that functions on several levels: the elements of earth, wind, water, fire and humanness reveal or describe the protagonist's mental state.

In Bombal's "The Tree" the protagonist, Brígida, a young woman is unhappily married to an older man. She escapes her reality by focusing on a rubber tree right outside her window. She lives through the tree that appears to transform itself into various elements while serving as her refuge and protector from the outside world.

In Bombal's story the first reference to the tree, a metaphor that forms a significant part of the story occurs when the narrator mentions that Brígida's sadness is diminished almost immediately upon entering her dressing room. "Is it a surge or rush of waves murmuring like a sea of leaves or is it Beethoven? No. It is the tree. (Crow 158) (Translated by N. Nik).

Brígida experiences sexual and emotional frustration as a young girl married to a much older man whom she married "because at that solemn and taciturn man's side she did not feel guilty of being whatever: crazy, playful and lazy (Crow 157) (Translated by N. Nik).

Her dressing chamber is her refuge from a loveless marriage. It is shaded by a tree and there she feels cool and refreshed. The tree is a symbol of Brígida's emotional vision, physically representing her real life and her fantasy life.

The tree is connected with the emotional state of Bombal and Garro's protagonists as if

"nature itself were both affecting and reflecting the human situation" (Feo 1).

The protagonist in these stories is searching for love. She feels alienated from family and society in general and is driven to find solace in a fantasy world that is more tolerable than the real world.

The tree is viewed as a positive element. It gives the protagonist a refuge from stifling situation. The tree becomes a place of refuge, a place where she can give expression to her feelings. It is a place where the protagonist attempts to escape the limitations of her situation through fantasy. The idea of life as stifling for the female protagonist underlies the story.

In the patriarchal setting, the protagonist represses her feelings and turns to the realm of nature—a tree as a means of attaining personal freedom and emotional independence.

The internal condition, the emotional state of the protagonist is revealed through the physical condition of the tree. (Adams 22)

In the stories of Bombal and Garro, the tree destroys reality; it alienates the protagonist from emotional contact with external reality. The tree as it appears in different parts of the stories has shown that it is an element used by the authors for a variety of purposes. (Adams 24)

Bombal and Garro's works characterized by the use of powerful imagery and fantastic symbols represent the problems of being a woman in a patriarchal society in Latin America.

The stories deal with the theme of illusion, and with the conflict between illusory and matter-of-fact realities (Debicki 123).

In the stories of Bombal and Garro there exists a positive relationship with nature. "In the dressing room, even one's sight felt rested and refreshed. The pale cretonne, the tree that wove shadows like those of shimmering cold water, the mirrors that double its foliage and opened into an infinite green forest. How delightful this room was! It seemed a world sunken in an aquarium." (Crow 158) (Translated by N. Nik).

For Bombal, and this is applied to Garro as well, "... with her bold disregard for simple realism in favor of heightened reality in which the external world reflects the internal truth of the character's feelings, and with a deliberate mingling of fantasy, memory and event . . . In this psychological investigation Bombal (and



Garro) make imagination, emotion and dream equal in importance to reality and creates a narrative linked by metaphor". (Mesic 1)

In Bombal and Garro's stories the protagonists are unprepared to act to alter their situation. In Brígida's case this is due to the fact that her widowed father had neglected her education. Also patriarchal society's social attitudes about appropriate female behavior hinder the protagonist's ability to live their own life.

As in the case of Bombal's protagonist Brígida's marriage fails to provide fulfillment as expected. She has gone from the constraints of her father's house to the constraints of her husband's house.

The concept of marriage as a state of stagnation for the protagonist also underlies Bombal's "The Tree". The protagonist finds little meaningful activity in her marriage. She internalizes her father's husband's perception of her and believes it is her fault that she is dissatisfied with life and not their fault (Williams 21).

Since it is the men in the protagonist's life that stifle her, she turns to the realm of nature to express herself.

Bombal and Garro fuse realism with the fantastic to express the loneliness and frustration of their female protagonist who live in a world where the lines between concrete reality and fantasy are one. Their writings are full of imagery especially nature imagery where "the natural world becomes a type of magical looking glass through which these women perceive and depict their inner dramas," (Scott 2).

The female character one finds in their works is unloved, unfulfilled and alienated. She lives to compensate for her predicament by developing a fantasy life. In "The Tree" Brígida, the main character is an unhappily married woman who makes her life bearable by focusing on a rubber tree outside her bedroom window. She lives through the tree, which seems to possess a life of its own and which serves not only as a refuge from her, but also as a direct shield from the outside world: she had only to enter the room to experience an almost overpowering sense of well-being. (Feo 2)

Bombal and Garro use a rather restricting but tightly connected network of images, made explicit, in the first instance in the titles of their

writings: such as "El árbol", "The Tree". They are the physical expressions of the inner worlds of the protagonist, worlds that find articulation only in this interior identification with natural elements, and seldom through verbal articulation, or action. (Scott 4)

As the protagonist fails to communicate with those around them and their situation deteriorates, she lapses into apathy. The initiatives of the heroine fail to produce the desired results.

The idea of marriage as a state of stagnation for the protagonist also underlies "The Tree" for she finds little meaningful activity within the domestic realm. It is her husband who defines her sphere of activity; the protagonist must repress her own wishes. She looks for a satisfactory means of communication and turns to the realm of nature as an avenue of personal freedom. Her communication with the tree marks the beginning of her emotional independence from her husband, a move that will culminate in her decision to leave him. For the protagonist the world of nature is a separate realm which enables her to make the transition from dependence to independence. (Williams 21)

The overall emotional trajectory of the protagonist is quite simple, starting from an unfulfilled situation, the protagonist moves away from the real world into herself, through a process of increasing fantasy, and then is compelled to retreat from this created world to face reality. Her interior movement is the focus of the story. (Adams 16)

However there are exterior social dimensions that, although they never come into the foreground, provide a hidden influence that has the capacity to push the protagonists into themselves, and lack of control over their lives. (Adams 16) The position of women in the society described in Bombal's story is the most outstanding of these forces, in that it makes marriage the central issue of their lives. On the emotional level, the most significant one within Bombal's works, this position gives men the power of choice, as opposed to women's relative helplessness, turning men into an external alienating force.

Thus the author shows women's position in society to be a force that causes alienation.

The tree becomes a barrier, alienating the



protagonist from any contact with external reality. The tree personified coincides with her feelings, her inner world. The tree is a symbol functioning on several levels, providing insight into her condition. It is a visual measure of the alienation from external reality (Adams 24).

When the tree is cut down, the protagonist realizes nature or the tree, like her husband, are not capable of satisfying her desire for self-expression and as Lorna V. Williams in "The Shrouded Woman: Marriage and its constraints in the fiction of María Luisa Bombal" explains: "Once Brígida is forced to recognize the impingement of the social world upon the natural one, she becomes aware that she, too, exists in a social dimension, and therefore, like the tree, she must also come to terms with the world of change." Reality at the end overpowers her fantasy world.

Williams writes that when the tree is cut down, the protagonist realizes that the tree—like her husband—are both subject to social process and death. When she realizes that the external world impinges upon the natural one, she becomes aware that she, too, exists in a social dimension, and therefore, like the tree, she must also come to terms with the world of change. She comes to an understanding that neither tree nor husband can provide a stable existence for her, whereupon she rejects the earlier life and decides that she will be responsible for her own life: "Lie! Her resignation and serenity were lies; she wanted love, yes love, and trips and foolishness and love, love " (125). The protagonist rebels against the status quo, and, instead longs for love and freedom.

In Bombal's story when the tree is cut down and reality is admitted into her refuge, the protagonist decides to live her own life.

In Garro's story, relationships end as they began with disillusioned and alienated characters.

In Bombal's story the felling of the tree is the catalyst that dramatically changes the protagonist's life. With the death of the tree the filter is no longer there and the ugliness of reality, shocks the protagonist into self-awareness: an old husband who apparently does not love her. Painful as this harsh unfiltered light is that now shines in her dressing room it is conducive to personal insight and the

understanding that she has no function whatever as Luis' wife, not even that of being a mother. With awareness comes the strength to take action and she leaves her husband. (7)

As Williams notes: when the tree is cut down, the protagonist comes to realize that the tree, like her old husband, does not exist in a timeless dimension, but is subject to social process and death. Once the protagonist is forced to recognize the impingement of the social world upon the natural one, she realizes that she, too, exists in a social dimension, and therefore, like the tree must also come to terms with the world of change. Once the protagonist understands that neither the tree nor her husband can guarantee her a stable life, she assumes the risk of rebuilding her existence, not according to her husband and father's desires, but according to her own desires. (21-30)

The tree is a central element in the crucial scene in which reality finally overpowers her fantasy world. (Adams 27)

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