



THE DISRUPTING PRESENCE; SHE- FIGURE IN BORGES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of Borges is to impart to his reader the sense of the mystery of the world, a sense of skeptical reverence, akin to Einstein's "cosmic religious feelings". For this, as a man of letters, he may use any means at his disposal, including magic and mysticism, and including logic, valid or somewhat faulty. (Agassi, 1970)

*Borges's world is indeed swarming with the paradoxical mixture of ordinarily simple and extremely violent. It is replete with scenes carved out of real life and put forward for simultaneous depiction of the mysteriously real. The reporters of tales in his stories are selected from among ordinary people like a friend, a neighbor or a passerby. However, within such seemingly natural, tough life of his characters, the feminine aspect of life is strongly attenuated and even erased. In other words, Borges's masculine world has sterilized itself against female characters. Nonetheless, there occasionally arises the need for the presence of a woman in his stories. In such cases, female characters are shown as constantly being manipulated by male figures in order to provide temporary pleasure for men. This degrades them to a position of no more than an object and a part of the setting for the story. Nonetheless, in a few instances, Borges manages to create female characters that succeed in having an active role rather than that of a passive being in his violent masculine world. The present study aims to examine these characters that differ greatly depending on the way they influence patriarchal interactions- either directly or indirectly. Four female characters that appear in four short stories; *El Muerto*, *La Intrusa*, *Juan Muraña*, and more importantly *Emma Zunz*, whose protagonist is a woman, are hence studied comparatively and through thorough examination of female role from a psychological point of view.*

Key Words: Passive woman, Puppet woman, Transference, Active woman

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INTRODUCTION

Borges is barely seen out of the masculine world of his patriarchal society within which female characters, if they appear at all, are being manipulated by male figures. In his phallic world, women are usually considered as unimportant aspects of life whose only function is as objects that provide temporary pleasure for men. In other words, they are regarded as parts of the setting for the story. This world which is depicted in most of his stories seems too violent for women to participate in as members. Nonetheless, in a few stories, Borges manages to create female characters that succeed in having an active role rather than that of a passive being. In such cases, they manage to free themselves from object-like passivity and turn to subject-like agents exerting free will to achieve whatever it is they want to attain. These characters differ greatly depending on the way they influence patriarchal interactions- either directly or indirectly. The present study tries to trace the causes for this effect through examining four female characters that appear in four short stories; *El muerto*, *La intrusa*, *Juan Muraña*, and more importantly *Emma Zunz*, whose protagonist is a woman. While in the first two stories, the two women become the causes of imbalance in male relationships indirectly and only through their presences as objects that metaphorically symbolize phallic power and authority when possessed, in the other two; they themselves turn to agents capable of action who can replace signs through transferring themselves into the masculine world. By stepping into the forbidden territory, these characters influence the symbolic. However, the methods by which this effect is achieved vary widely in these stories. The aim of this study is to delineate how this purpose is achieved through thorough examination of female role from a psychological point of view. For the purpose of convenience and in order to classify the four stories based on the method of treating women, we have separated the stories to three distinct groups starting with conventionally accepted woman in *La intrusa* and *El muerto* to unconscious revolutionary in *Juan Muraña* and more importantly, the conscious rebel in the person of *Emma Zunz*.

The Passive Puppet in *La intrusa* and *El muerto*

To begin with, we need to have a quick review of the concept of passive woman, namely the Puppet Woman versus the concept of New Woman, which Greta Olson clearly defines in her article *Representation(s) of Femininity in Angela Carter's Postmodern Female Gothic*. While classifying a Paulina Palmer's concept of femininity as entrapment which she concludes is a very common type of woman, Olson notes that "Thus, the state of being a woman is clearly equated with an extreme passivity and lack of control over oneself." (?) Indeed, this is the picture which is frequently, and mostly indirectly, represented by Borges in his stories. His women characters are seen not in active roles but rather as stable presences that fill no more than a role surrounding objects do. They are more often than not depicted either as part of service in a cheap hotel, a brothel, or as dancers of a bar, or as mistresses to the local charlatan. These roles account for much of what Olson continues to describe. Such a view regards femininity as entrapment, or better defined as;

A puppet is the embodiment of passivity, as she does not have any power of her own. Instead, she is completely controlled by another person, the puppet player, who freely exerts his or her power over the puppet. (?)

The more the woman is absorbed in her passive puppet role, the more she is dominated. On the other hand, “the more women make themselves “invisible”, the more they are accepted in this world governed by men”. (Olson ?) This is a notion which is often hailed as true from the point of view of many new psycho-linguists like Lacan and Kristeva, who divide the world to two major domains of the imaginary and the symbolic. Such a determining classification renders everything so simple and pertinent. The child lives on in the plentiful imaginary until the point s/he has to let go of it and enter the symbolic. This transference stage is perfected differently for a male and a female child. The male child can and does enter the symbolic like an agent with the authority to exert his will, while the female child remains the permanent *other* whose existence is continuously at the mercy of her male counterpart. However, based on Olson’s classification, even this *other* figure can step to gain authority by going through a symbolic transference stage with which she will be capable of reversing, or better still, disturbing the superficial order. This capable *other* would then be the *New Woman*.

In case of the first two stories, the woman is simply the passive *other*. *La intrusa* is the tale of the two brothers, Cristián and Eduardo Nilsen who bring a Juliana Burgos home only to find that she disturbs their previously held harmony.

... Cristián carried Juliana Burgos home to live with him. The truth was, in doing so he had gained a servant, but it was also true that he lavished ghastly trinkets upon her and showed her off at parties— those shabby little tenement house parties where certain tango steps..... At first, Eduardo lived with them. Then he went off to Arrecifes on some business, and on his return he brought a girl home with him, too; he had picked her up on the road. Within a few days he threw her out. He grew ever more sullen and bad-tempered (Borges, 1998)

The notion of puppet as controlled by others finds good grounds in this story. The two brothers share the woman who, despite being given a name, has no personality, no identity, and no “nothing”.

"I'm going off to that bust over at Farias' place. There's Juliana—if you want her, use her." His tone was half-peremptory, half-cordial. Eduardo stood for a moment looking at him; he didn't know what to do. Cristián stood up, said good-bye to Eduardo—not to Juliana, who was a mere thing— mounted his horse, and rode off at an unhurried trot. From that night onward, they shared her. (Borges, 1998)

Juliana seems to be just a doll which is controlled by the two brothers and summoned when they wish. There are no objections recorded of her dissatisfaction to fill this role. Hence, it is easy to conclude that “Juliana is also a thing. She is no one. She is treated as an object and displays a

bestial subservience to her masters' whims." (Bossart, 2003) It seems as if she has accepted her current situation as the only existing option, a fact which lets us easily classify her as a puppet. How, then, does this puppet turn malicious as a potential source of danger and "determines the brothers' fate [?]" (Bossart, 2003)

Brant decides that this new toy- thing makes them recognize their close existence or their "homosexual desire" for each other (1995). Ultimately, Juliana is dumped like garbage into a landfill because she has disturbed, by her mere presence and not through assuming any active role, the relationship between the two brothers and hence has made them lose their harmonious relationship. Therefore, realizing that the temporary trick of sending her to a brothel will not work, the older brother takes her life so that equilibrium is restored and the two brothers can reunite in tears.

Let's go to work, brother. The buzzards'll come in to clean up after us. I killed'er today. We'll leave'er here, her and her fancy clothes. She won't cause any more hurt." Almost weeping, they embraced. Now they were linked by yet another bond: the woman grievously sacrificed, and the obligation to forget her. (Borges, 1998)

Brant sees this as an absolute declaration of the fact that "Sex and women are used primarily as bargaining chips in the relationship between men, never for the traditional purposes of either procreation or pleasure. Sex in Borges' fiction, by means of an objectified female body, is nothing more than a manoeuvre that gives definition and dynamism to the interaction between men." (1995) He further notes that;

Cristián kills Juliana, not because he hates this woman or women in general, but rather because as long as Juliana exists as an intermediary, an impediment that keeps the brothers from realizing fully their homoerotic desire, the two men will never be able to connect to each other directly. The two need to move beyond a relationship with a communal woman as surrogate to a relationship with their true object of desire. In order to accomplish this, they remove the obstacle that keeps them apart and through this "sacrifice," they are joined permanently in a more intimate way. (Brant, 1995)

Quite the same thing happens in the second tale. *El meurto* depicts the woman as a cause, a phallic symbol, an object of authority, and the representation of yearning for power. This time, the passive woman functions as a precious stone or a bag of money would do. Possessing her could mean that the owner is powerful since she is the very embodiment of what they desire. In other words, she belongs to the most powerful and having her symbolizes the transference of such a power. Benjamín Otálora, the protagonist, is a modern day Lancelot who has found his way to the round table of the street gang. Having been settled, he looks forward to gaining the attention of Bandeira, the leader of the gang. It is also worth mentioning that Otálora sees in the person of Bandeira the so called father figure, whose position and authority are always coveted. Unfortunately for Otálora,

the father figure possesses complete authority over his loyal subjects, a fact which ultimately culminates in Otálora's death. Otálora makes a perfect plan to fulfill his desire of achieving what Bandeira has. "The plan is the result of his desire to possess Bandeira's most important symbols of power: his horse, his saddle, and his woman with the bright red hair." (Brant, 1995) He manages to lay hands on all these symbols of authority. One day, after having been wounded, Otálora rides Bandeira's horse back to the ranch, spills blood on the saddle, and manages to sleep with his woman not knowing all this is the father's plot devised to entrap the disobeying son. The role of the woman is hence no more than a means to an end, which the male figure desires her to fulfill and which she obeys without any objections. Therefore, the last scene records how she helps Otálora meet his inevitable doom;

She opens it immediately, as though she were waiting for the knock. She comes out barefoot and half dressed. In an effeminate, wheedling voice, the boss speaks an order: "Since you and the city slicker there are so in love, go give him a kiss so everybody can see." He adds a vulgar detail. The woman tries to resist, but two men have taken her by the arms, and they throw her on top of Otálora. In tears, she kisses his face and his chest. Ulpiano Suárez has pulled his gun. Otálora realizes, before he dies, that he has been betrayed from the beginning, that he has been sentenced to death, that he has been allowed to love, to command, and win because he was already as good as dead, because so far as Bandeira was concerned, he was already a dead man. Suárez fires, almost with a sneer. (Borges, 1998)

The Unconscious Transformation of the Puppet Woman in Juan Muraña

The third story to be discussed here is narrated through a typically Borgesian method to startle the reader through introduction of a surprise ending since as Agassi points out;

...Borges wishes to shake in his reader the commonsensical confidence that one knows the difference between dream and reality- be this confidence based on any intuition or on any criterion to demarcate the two. (1970)

The story of Juan Muraña introduces a new but rare type of Borgesian woman who is capable of taking steps and achieving justice in her own way. "In comparison to the passive "Puppet-Woman", it is the quality of being active that fundamentally characterizes the second type of femininity." (Olson ?) This is the notion that is depicted in this third story which deals with the fanciful imagination of a woman named Florentina whose lack of power to analyze and understand her husband's death ultimately changes her to an agent capable of disturbing the superficial order of events, committing murder, and reversing her situation without ever being really aware of the fact. The woman is the wife of a late Juan Muraña who believes her husband is neither dead nor gone. His presence still haunts the mad woman who identifies him with a knife she has inherited from him. Such dubious perception is a major characteristic of Borges' metaphoric world that sets up

“this essential disjunction between the real and the ideal, between the image and essence” (Zamora, 2002).

It is also noteworthy that knife in the world of Borges symbolizes power, animosity, and masculine mercilessness toward his kind. It is one of the symbols of the harsh world of reality to which women have no access in Borges. But ironically, this is the very object with which, Florentina is able to perform a symbolic transference, cross the border, and free herself from being a passive woman and an *other*. Furthermore, this knife is a phallic sign. And it is what the mad woman needs to pierce through the symbolic male world and to punish the wrong doer while the whole time, she believes it is Juan who is putting things right;

The only person in Buenos Aires utterly unconcerned by the scandal was my aunt Florentina. With the insistence of old age, all she would say when the subject was brought up was, "I told you people that Juan would never stand for that wop putting us out in the street." (Borges, 1998)

As a symbolic sign of her husband, the knife exerts his power in that like the time of their real union- during which her husband was the sign of her access to the patriarchal symbolic- now the knife shows her a way out of the mess of her life, even if temporarily. However, this woman is not capable of transferring herself to a *New Woman* consciously. She only does that through the intermediary knife. Possessing the knife makes the mad woman doubly powerful in that she not only passes the border but also acquires the same power her man once had and hence becomes equally important and effective in changing a situation, something she would not have been able to do had she stopped in her passive state of existence. The story of her success in putting things right is only to be discovered later as a surprise by her nephew, and the reader alike, who listen to her disclose the miraculous secret;

"I know what brings you up here," my aunt said, without raising her eyes. "Your mother sent you. She can't get it through her head that it was Juan that saved us."
"Juan?" I managed to say. "Juan died over ten years ago." "Juan is here," she said. "You want to see him?" She opened the drawer of the nightstand and took out a dagger. "Here he is," she said softly. "I knew he'd never leave me. There's never been a man like him on earth. The wop never had a chance." (Borges, 1998)

The New Woman in Emma Zunz

The quest for understanding has value in and of itself, despite the fact that it can never be completed, and this universal human experience is captured in almost every aspect of Borges's stories. Borges works are not about the secrets of life and the universe; they are about people's relationship with these secrets, about their attempts to find the answers to their questions and the meaning in their lives. (Cook, 2009)

In the fourth story, the passive woman steps further to perform this quest. Emma Zunz is Borges's solitary figure this time. Unlike Florentina's, Emma Zunz's transference is very much the conscious and voluntary transgression of norms by a conventional being who deliberately transfers herself to an agent in the patriarchal world. The primary motive for this action is rage. She has been depicted as an indirectly betrayed woman because a Mr. Loewenthal has deprived her from the company of her father who used to be her only means of connection to the symbolic and the basis of her existence. Furthermore, he has been indirectly responsible for her troubled existence in the world since due to losing her connection to the world, which had been set up by her relation to her father, she has turned to be a pathologically fearing person who is unable to make and maintain relationships. "Then they [the friends] talked about boyfriends and no one expected Emma to speak. In April she would be nineteen years old, but men inspired in her, still, an almost pathological fear." (Borges, 1964) The nature of Emma and her father's relationship is even emphasized more in the choice of their names. Emma was a part of Emmanuel who is gone now. However, it is ironic that the news of his death "creates a kind of conversion or realization in Emma." (Bossart, 2003) This constitutes the source of her rage making her capable and daring enough to step into the venture. Ironically, however, it seems as if she needed her father to be removed as an obstacle so that she could leave her position as a fearing *other* and transfer herself symbolically to an agent;

The story answers to a rigorously logical plan that is discovered by the reader in retrospect when he rereads the opening sentences. Only on a second reading can the reader understand the pertinence of the apparently banal information mentioned in the first lines of the story. By mentioning Loewenthal, Emma and her father, the first sentence already suggests the triangle of relations that will trigger the action and define the plot of the story. The inclusion of the factory anticipates the setting where the possession of money plays a predominant role in the game of power. (Acquarone, 1988)

Yet, this story has a lot to offer to the critics. Porinsky emphasizes manipulation of ideas in Emma Zunz. She contends that "He [Borges] prides himself on manipulating or "losing" his readers in his complex tales full of irony and psychological puzzles. "Emma Zunz" is no exception." (2002) She believes that even the 'righteousness' or 'falsity' of Emma Zunz is the idea Borges keeps playing with because he never gives us a clue of whether Emma's accusations were ever justified or not. Nonetheless, it is not the right or wrong that matters here. What matters is the motive, the transference itself as well as the subsequent action that is aimed to free Emma from the permanent torture. By so doing, Emma succeeds in turning against whatever is the patriarchal manipulation of her type, according to which females are being manipulated by male figures;

The sordidness of her environment seems to correspond to her social condition though not to her sensibility which rebels against it. The principles of contiguity and difference that define Emma as an idiosyncratic individual allow the character to stand

out against the background of the environment to take up a position from which to affect her circumstances. Her rationally conceived plan and its cold and controlled realization are crowned with success and she achieves the desired vengeance. (Acquarone, 1988)

Emma's revolt and transformation is triggered by her desire to take revenge. Nonetheless, since the object is beyond her reach where she stands in her current situation as a passive and fearing type of female and as an excluded *other*, she has got no choice but to transfer to the realm of the powerful. This is her first step;

She lay down after lunch and reviewed, with her eyes closed, the plan she had devised. She thought that the final step would be less horrible than the first and that it would doubtlessly afford her the taste of victory and justice. (Borges, 1964)

She knows very well that such an entrance would be at a high price, namely the sacrifice of her own body in letting an intruder pierce into her. This is the first lesson she teaches herself and learns very well that the masculine world is a harsh one. Furthermore, this is what she needs to feel the rage and the dishonor her father felt to be able to identify with him and become his tool of revenge. Therefore, in her beautifully devised scheme, she seeks to be violated by such a man that can flare the fire within her;

One of them, very young, she feared might inspire some tenderness in her and she chose instead another, perhaps shorter than she and coarse, in order that the purity of the horror might not be mitigated....The man, a Swede or Finn, did not speak Spanish. He was a tool for Emma, as she was for him, but she served him for pleasure whereas he served her for justice. (Borges, 1964)

This is the second lesson she teaches herself. She knows very well that one cannot enter the patriarchal realm empty handed. Patriarchal means are absolutely necessary. One such equipment is the temporary possession of the phallic sign which is not gained by pleasure but by pain and rage, and which causes her to tear the money the man leaves on the table once he is done with her. Having finished the second and most difficult step of initiation, Emma is able to move forward more steadfastly since her "fear was lost in the grief of her body, in her disgust." (Borges, 1964) Now she knows what has been done cannot be reversed and somebody has to pay for it. She is dishonored as her father was and hence, she can identify with him now. "Emma was now wreaking vengeance for her own shame, rather than that of her father. The two situations had now become fused into one." (Porinsky, 2002) Emma's existence is dubious since she is empowered and is simultaneously powerless because ironically in order to take control of one and to seek vengeance, she has had to welcome the cruelty and the dishonor imposed by another symbolized in her voluntary request for being raped.

Having perfected the steps of her transference, Emma has started thinking like a man. She shows equal capabilities of a man. She has devised a perfect plan. A plan that escapes punishment since it was "not out of fear but because of being an instrument of Justice [that] she did not want to be

punished.” (Borges, 1964) Understanding that the means to a justified end are justifiable, now she goes to look for yet another and more important apparatus of power, the revolver everyone knows Loewenthal hides in the drawer. Much like the knife, the revolver is a sign of power and authority. Through possessing Loewenthal’s gun, Emma Zunz can speak a language he understands well, the language of power and dominance, with which he has dominated so many people so far. Emma’s choice of revolver accounts for an outstanding difference between the two female transgressors in this paper. While Florentina’s knife kills silently without exposing the murderer, Emma Zunz’s gunshot summons attention to what Emma wishes to say and hide simultaneously. By banging its way through the flesh, it leaves not only the sign but also the echo of the agent.

Unlike other female characters discussed above, Emma is capable of making decisions and estimating its cost. She is also capable of accepting the consequences of her loss. Whether such transformation is successful or not, since she never knows if he understood the cause of his murder, the desire to do so has triggered the initiation Emma needed to relieve herself from her pathological passive state and serve a cause, whether constructed on real basis or fabricated with lies.

CONCLUSION

Borges’ world remains devoid of women loved. There is no love story formed, no romantic feelings recorded. In case of the four stories depicted here, we can notice much the same circumstance. Only mere attractions toward a female character happen to exist. And when this is the case, these attractions are not due to feelings of love or like but as a result of aspiring for either power or pleasure. More often than not, women characters possess no personality of their own. They have never had any identity to lose. They remain objects to play with; *others* whose Puppet-like passivity dominates most of them like the female residents of La intrusa and El meurto. However, from time to time, a Florentina or an Emma Zunz steps in to symbolically transfer herself, to trade her position as an *other* for the position of an agent and to shake the foundations of a relaxed world dominated by harsh masculine ideology, either unconsciously or consciously, but only and only if she can access masculine signs and tools.

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