

Culture and Sexuality: Women in *Raining Backwards*

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Abstract

With the aid of Postmodernist literary theories by Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, I have analyzed the link between culture and sexuality by one of the most influential authors among the latest boom in Cuban-American literature being written in English.



Raining Backwards is a key work, not only in Roberto G. Fernández's opus, but also in Cuban exile novels in general. The recurrent characters, who previously appeared in *La vida es un SPECIAL* (1981) and *La montaña rusa* (1985), reach in *Raining Backwards* an originality not previously seen in Cuban literature written in the United States. The linguistic humor, the extravagant characters, and a reality that is paradoxically and simultaneously realistic and absurd, come together to describe the tragicomic history of the Cuban exile in Miami. This world is accurately described as carnivalesque, according to the theories of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, and has been expertly analyzed in several essays by critics like Mary Vásquez and Jorge Febles. *Raining Backwards* is, as Vásquez says: "A satirical yet loving depiction of exile," ("Gender" 79); according to Febles the author himself states that this novel is "a tribute to a dying era" ("Songs" 105). With the passing of time, the Cuban exiles in this fictional work become assimilated to the majority American culture that surrounds them. The rupture with Cuban traditions begins with the young people

who have grown up in the United States, but the ultimate death blow to Cubanness in its Diaspora is the prohibition of the use of the Spanish language by the Anglo-Saxon terrorist group the Tongue Brigade. The elapse of time first brings the complete erasure of their native language and subsequently causes the total loss of self-identification with anything Cuban by this exile group.

This paper will attempt to analyze the sexuality of Cuban or Cuban-American women within the culture of Cuban Miami, as it appears in *Raining Backwards*. The ambiance in which these women live is a mixture of two cultures: Cuban and American. Sexuality, of course, has always been controlled in any society at any time. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault analyzes several sexual constraints throughout the centuries and cites the most important as the canon laws of the Church along with its pastoral duties; the civil laws of the government; and cultural restrictions enforced through public opinion (317). *Raining Backwards* contains examples of all these constraints, especially the latter one, since in Little Havana "el que dirán" ("what will people say") reigns supreme. Several female characters will be mentioned, but there will be a detailed analysis of three women: Emelina González and her marriage in Cuba; Mirta Vergara, a sixty-year-old single woman; and Connie Rodríguez whose case is the most important one when it comes to sexuality in this bicultural society of Dade County, Florida.

American sexuality is perceived in the novel as too loose or too free by those characters who arrived in the United States from Cuba as adults. This particular freedom is seen by the exiles as an example of immorality. In the case of female premarital sex, Cuban parents vigorously attempt to curb it completely. Cuban parents want to keep their daughters "pure" for marriage. Barbarita Romero de González, one of the most conservative women of this group of Cuban and Cuban-American women, nostalgically remembers engagements back in the island, in that Cuba of years gone by, when and where premarital sex did not exist: "You see, when we started courting it was beautiful back then. There was no sex, nor all the indecencies there are now" (Fernández 67). This nostalgic point of view is that of a whole generation of older Cubans. Barbarita is delighted that her daughter has been able to keep her "honor" intact even though she attends a university outside of Miami: "..., when she came from Tallahassee, we took her for a physical she needed for her Cuban Student Loan application and Dr. Rolando told me privately, 'I must congratulate you, Mrs. González, your daughter [Isabel] is still a *señorita*'" (Fernández 105).

This concept that Barbarita has concerning perfect courtships and engagements in pre-Castro Cuba becomes a grotesque example in the case of her cousin Emelina González. This bride goes to her nuptials without the slightest idea about sexual intimacy within marriage: "I was as innocent as a two-year-old when I went to the altar. I didn't even know that babies came from Paris in a stork's bill" (Fernández 127). Emelina's ignorance is not only biological but also legendary, since she does not even know the euphemistic story of the stork. This sexual innocence is seen as a cultural form of keeping young ladies ignorant concerning sexual matters; sexual unenlightenment becomes a security blanket to keep girls of marriageable age virginal. Lack of physical knowledge is also accompanied in the case of Emelina by her religious belief in miraculous phenomena. She is sure that only her first daughter, Linda Lucia, was conceived by the sexual act; that is why she considers her daughter a product of sin, while her other three children are the result of immaculate conceptions: "Linda Lucia was born in sin. ... My other children were born out of faith, I prayed so hard to have them that the miracle was given to me three times" (Fernández 130). The repulsion to the sexual act, even when it is sanctified by Christian marriage, causes this hyperbolic sexual ignoramus to fall into the carnivalesque world of Rabelais, where, according to Bakhtin, the needs of the human body are mixed in a grotesque manner (172). In order to avoid intimate relations with her husband, Emelina ingests laxatives on a daily basis before he returns from work. Several times her terror of carnal knowledge

automatically produces the desired result without using any laxative.

Emelina, a woman educated to see sexuality as a sin, has a terrible relationship with her older daughter, Linda Lucia, whom she considers proof of her one great sin. When Linda Lucia is about to reach her physical maturity in exile, Emelina won't allow it by using needle and thread. This monstrous "operation" can be seen as the result of not only deep psychological problems on Emelina's part, but also as a reflection of economical and political points of view, as well. The Santería (Afro-Cuban religion) priest Quinn (Joaquín) is Emelina's "religious" adviser who intercedes between mother and daughter. Emelina explains to this young Cuban-American man that her mother forced her to marry a rich man back in Cuba, whom she now wishes to divorce. However, she doesn't want to go ahead with her plans if there is a possibility of returning to Cuba in the future to regain the properties that were confiscated by the communists. Quinn informs Emelina that a return to Cuba will be impossible after her daughter becomes a woman. The theme of sexuality is grotesquely mixed with politics and economics. Emelina believes that she is a good Catholic, but she takes the Santero's advice since her desire to divorce is not allowed within the dogma of the Catholic Church. Emelina attempts to return to the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church by beginning the official process of annulling her marriage of thirty years, causing her to be ridiculed by other Cuban exiles: "Now she is trying to get the marriage annulled and have herself declared a *señorita*, after four children!" (Fernández 46). The criticism of the community by means of burlesque laughter is directed against Emelina's divorce, and finds its mark by attempting to unite the canonical law of marriage annulment with the physical impossibility of the restoration of her virginity.

The second case is that of Miss Mirta Vergara, a sixty-year-old single woman. Mirta's personality can be explained by two psychological problems that are bound together in the plot of the novel: her constant lying and her sexual frustration. The beginning of her pathological lying can be found in the fact that in exile she has made up a false wealthy past; apparently the only mansion in which Mirta has lived in Varadero Beach is the one that her mother used to clean. Her sexual repression is symbolically represented in this character by an itch that she has felt since her youth. Mirta is a perfect example of what Foucault calls, in his *History of Sexuality*, the transformation of sexuality into speech (304). Miss Vergara is not sexually ignorant like Emelina. She is very interested in sex although she has not had any personal experience. For Mirta, perhaps because of her age, sex becomes almost completely a discursive theme. Gabriella Ibieta alludes to this when she says: "For Mirta, desire of the flesh and of the spirit can only be mediated through words" (71). Mirta's "literary" creation and the lies that she tells her girlfriends, always place her in the center of Eloy's desire and that of her mythical boyfriend from Varadero Beach. Mirta writes a pornographic short story with the title of "You Really Drive Me Wild Baby." She allows her girlfriend Barbarita to read this short story that is her fictitious solution of her sexual frustration; writing as desired reality. Fiction finally unites Mirta and her mythical boyfriend in an amazing reunion in exile where sexual desire and patriotism for the enslaved Cuba intensely mix:

At that moment, the freedom fighter didn't care about the cause, the return to Varadero, the communists or the nuns. And MV, who had never experienced the ultimate, remembered in her mind the royal palms, the smokestacks of her hometown sugar mill, the cathedral's spires, and realized her pastries were not being baked in vain. His floating loblolly entered the Suwanee

river that was flowing from her thighs, and she shouted in the midst of her sighs, sobs, gasping, moaning and the palpitation of her womb: "Death to the communists! Long live free Cuba!" (Fernández 115).

Besides creating sexual satisfaction through writing, Mirta also lies to her girlfriends about her relationship with Eloy. The reader witnesses how Mirta attempts to seduce this young boy. Once again sexuality is tied to the theme of exile. Eloy wants Mirta to tell him about the beauty of Cuba, and she does this in exchange for his help around the house. The relationship soon evolves into child abuse. The boy has to help her bathe and she enjoys being lathered up by him. Sexuality falls again into a carnivalesque world where the intimacy of the bath is mixed grotesquely with other needs of the human body, like helping her blow her nose or remove the blackheads on her back. Apparently, the seduction does not go any further than her own individual pleasure. However, Mirta makes up an episode in which she is the victim of sexual assault by Eloy; perhaps this can be explained psychologically by the fact that the child refuses to consummate the relationship. The ever changing story of the "rape" is directed, not to the police, but only to her girlfriends, and her "irresistible beauty" becomes the explanation for Eloy's "crime:" "I don't know what it is I have, but it drives men wild" (Fernández 55). Each time that she tells about the same incident it occurs during different days of the week, or while she is doing something completely different, and Eloy "assaults" her with a different kind of weapon. The most interesting of these descriptions of aggression is when Mirta compares her "dishonor" with that of the daughters of El Cid at Corpes just as in the Spanish epic poem of the same name.

Mirta also fictionalizes the alleged sexual attack in a letter to Helen Kings, Ph.D. Doctor Kings offers advice on the radio and in the press. Shari Benstock in her book *Textualizing the Feminine* has analyzed epistolary writing and how this genre is historically connected to women. Mirta, as Benstock mentions, uses a pseudonym in her correspondence in order to keep her identity a secret and she signs the letter with the adjective "Ravished." The purpose of the letter is multiple; it serves to "link with [another woman] through correspondence," to "create an ideal version of [herself]," and it shows how "writing substitutes for the act of lovemaking" (91). This letter contains a great accumulation of falsehoods, but the impostures are mutual. Mirta thinks that she is communicating with an American psychologist, but Helen Kings, in reality Elena Reyes (a literal translation of her name), is a Cuban-American psychologist and she is "a counselor who apparently is neither wise nor worthy" according to the description by Professor Vásquez ("Parody" 94). In her letter Mirta idealizes her past as an heir to a great fortune in Cuba, a Cuba falsely described as a Hawaiian paradise. Mirta also speaks of her alleged counterrevolutionary work on behalf of a free Cuba. At the end of this version of the attack, Mirta alludes to a religious theme, adding that if she turns out to be pregnant (at her age!) she will not be able to get an abortion since she is a devout Catholic. This epistolary allusion to her great religiosity, never before mentioned, metamorphoses into the symbolic punishment that used to be imposed on single women who had sex by conservative Hispanic families. Mirta's solution to her own fictitious pregnancy is her future hypothetical entry into a convent for her loss of virginity. This old-fashioned concept of the convent as a refuge against "*el que dirán*" ["what will people say"] is also seen here. Her friend Barbarita, as the spokesperson for public opinion, demands of Mirta that from now on, she should come into her house through the back door so that she is not seen by the neighbors who would gossip about Mirta's "pregnancy."

The third case, that of Connie Rodríguez, is the most complex in the whole novel from the point of view of sexuality. She is a seventeen-year-old Cuban-American girl who is murdered during the action of the novel. Her death is a grotesque mixture of suicide and murder. The reasons that drive Connie to contemplate suicide are multiple and are related to sexuality and to the friction between her two cultures. The deep depression that Connie suffers before attempting to hang herself is the result of several personal problems: being deceived by her philandering American boyfriend, Bill, who made her pregnant; her frustrated youthful dream for becoming a cheerleader of the Miami Dolphins; and also the guilt that she feels for having betrayed her brother Keith. The suicide fails because the branches of the tree that she chooses to hang herself from are too frail to hold her weight. Connie needs help in removing the rope around her neck and that is when Patsy Jiménez, a Cuban-American reporter who is secretly in love with Connie, shows up. Connie rejects the homosexual relationship and Patsy abandons her without helping her. Connie's death is due to the torture suffered at the hands of Marylou, her American rival in the field of love and cheerleading. #9;

The influence of American culture is seen in Connie's choice of a sport, American football, and a boyfriend from the majority culture. Both preferences are linked to sexuality and the clash of two cultures. The romantic relationship between Connie and Bill, insecure from the outset since he considers all women to be just sexual objects, becomes more complicated when Bill starts a relationship with Marylou. The attitude of the American couple toward Connie is one of disdain for her specifically and for all Cubans in general. Bill's mother considers Cubans as racially inferior to Americans: "Oh, Mom, remember when you said, 'Billy, don't hang around with them people. They aren't white?'" (Fernández 175). Marylou as head cheerleader doesn't allow a Cuban to become a member of the team: "She tried out for the squad but she was too hairy and fat, ugly and with big Cuban hips" (Fernández 182). Connie sends a letter to Dr. Kings asking her how to keep her boyfriend, Bill, and the good doctor suggests that Connie have a sexual relationship with him in order not to lose him. Connie believes, just like Mirta, that she is dealing with an American adviser and Connie also signs her letter with an adjective, "Confused," instead of her name. Connie's letter and poems do not create a sexual fantasy as Mirta's do; instead they are a reflection of her sexual confusion due to living between two cultures. From Foucault's point of view, in his *History of Sexuality*, this has to do with the ancient custom of confessing one's transgressions (314). Connie's last writing is her suicide note; this note is not understood by the police or the press. The note is nothing less than an unconscious (Febles "Pretexto 69) copy, in prose and in macaronic English, of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's famous poem "Hombres necios" ["Silly Men."]

Jacinto Rodríguez, Connie's father, is the character who best represents the constraints of pre-nuptial sexuality for young women in Cuban culture. Father and daughter carry on a constant battle throughout *Raining Backwards*. Jacinto constantly criticizes the clothes that Connie wears because they are too short; according to him appearances are not deceiving and this type of revealing outfit shows a sexual desire that does not encourage marriage, but instead leads to total sexual freedom for its own sake. The critical moment for the relationship between father and daughter occurs when Connie has a tryout to become a cheerleader in her school and Jacinto won't allow it. Due to the influence of American culture Connie cannot understand her father's reaction: "I really hated him! Once he dragged me out of cheerleading practice. He was so mean! He knew I wanted to become a professional cheerleader for the Dolphins" (Fernández 91).

Connie's future plans clash with her father's and those of the Cuban community: "Anyway, I remember he saw her doing pirouettes on the school lawn, spreading her legs and jumping up and down in a very small skirt. He crossed the street, grabbed her by the hair and yelled. 'No daughter of mine is going to become a prostitute'" (Fernández 162). Jacinto also realizes that Connie is no longer a virgin: "she lost her virtue, She disgraced us. I asked myself many times: 'Who is going to take to the altar a virtueless woman?'" (Fernández 76). This problem is solved miraculously with the help of Cuba's patron saint, la Virgen de la Caridad, the Virgin of Charity, who concedes several wishes to Jacinto, among them the restoration of Connie's virginity. However, Jacinto rejects this miracle since it involves an exchange; Jacinto would have to promise not to divulge any secret told to him by his guardian angel, but he is dying to spread them through Little Havana. The guardian angel explains to Jacinto, while they drink Cuba Libres (Rum & Coke), that the problems in the world are due to the fact that there is no one in charge in heaven, that a celestial "junta" of good and bad archangels determine everything from above. Jacinto is unable to keep this secret and that is why Connie loses her "virtue" again.

The role of Mima, Connie's mother, is very important, although it does not appear to be so at first. Mima is too busy with her banana chip business and that is why her husband seems to be more concerned with constraining Connie's sexuality. However, Mima has left an indelible mark on her daughter; she has left Connie with an impression that sexuality and guilt go hand in hand with each other. Mary Vásquez ("Gender" 79) has already discussed the difficult message inculcated in Connie by her mother since childhood: "I told her so many times that love goes away but the pain remains" (Fernández 169). In order not to lose her boyfriend, Bill, Connie breaks with the Cuban tradition of female sexual abstinence before marriage, because of Dr. Kings' advice, but Connie keeps her only sexual relationship a secret from her mother. Connie and her brothers will do anything so that Mima doesn't find out this "tragedy." The keeping of this secret arrives at its most hyperbolic moment with the elevation of Quinn (Joaquín), the Santería priest and Connie's brother, to the papacy. Pontiff Joaquín I declares in his first encyclical the purity of his sister Connie. When this dogma threatens to bring humanity to the brink of a religious world war, the Pope Joaquín decides that it is preferable for this hecatomb to take place rather than having his mother find out Connie's 'dishonor:' "... I can't do this to my mother. She'd die if she ever found out what Connie and Bill were doing. I just can't do this to my mom!" (Fernández 212).



Roberto Fernández describes in a carnivalesque manner in *Raining Backwards* the complex and difficult sexuality of single Cuban women previously on the island and now in exile. Fernández has been able to create a reality that reflects this problem with a delicious sense of humor without taking away any of the tragic aspect that this theme produces. The sexuality of Cuban women remains in the novel, just as in reality, a problem still to be solved. Imitating American sexuality will not bring a solution; Helen Kings (Elena Reyes), Patsy Jiménez and Connie Rodríguez are examples of this failure. However, it is also a fiasco to try to ignore female sexuality before marriage as exemplified in the cases of Mirta Vergara and Emelina González. At the end of the

Twentieth Century, not attempting to see women as sexual beings brings with it insuperable

difficulties that have to be solved in the future, whether here in exile or upon returning to Cuba.

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Biography

Henry Pérez, Professor of Spanish, is a native of Cuba. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he specialized in Contemporary Literature from Spain and Latin America. He graduated with a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in Spanish and English. Dr. Pérez was the former Chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Manchester College in Indiana.

