

# The representation of women as a cultural historical subject in two literary works: *No me agarran viva* by Claribel Alegría and Darwin J. Flakoll and *La mujer habitada* by Gioconda Belli

*La representación de la mujer como sujeto histórico cultural en dos obras literarias: No me agarran viva, de Claribel Alegría y Darwin J. Flakoll; y La mujer habitada, de Gioconda Belli*

*A representação da mulher como sujeito histórico cultural em duas obras literárias: No me agarran viva, de Claribel Alegría e Darwin J. Flakoll; e La mujer habitada, de Gioconda Belli*

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## Karen Julissa Barahona Posada

Baldwin Wallace University

Karen Barahona is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Baldwin Wallace University. Her area of expertise is Latin American literature of the 20th-21st centuries with a focus on studies of testimony, gender, identity, memory and revolution in women's fiction. Whether in the classroom or directing research projects, Karen's work is infused with her goal of promoting the experiences of unheard and non-dominant individuals and groups in Latin America. She is the recipient of the 2017-2018 Baldwin Wallace Excellence in Community Engagement Faculty Award and the 2019 *Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero* Peace Mission Saint Romero Solidarity Award.

kbarahon@bw.edu  
orcid.org/0000-0001-7955-5540

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### Abstract

The revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s in Nicaragua and El Salvador put an end to the era of military dictatorships. Consequently, women redefined their political identity through revolutionary participation. Gioconda Belli reflected the Sandinismo in her works and marks the role of Nicaraguan women during the revolution in *La mujer habitada* (1998). In the same way, Claribel Alegría represented the Salvadoran revolutionary woman in her testimonial novel *No me agarran viva* (1983). The purpose of this work is

to demonstrate how the literary works rewrite history to vindicate women as historical subjects in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

### KEYWORDS

Political identity, Subjectivity, Sandinista revolution.

### Resumen

*En Nicaragua y El Salvador las revoluciones de los años setenta y ochenta pusieron fin a la era de dictaduras militares, la mujer redefine su identidad política mediante la participación revolucionaria.*

*Gioconda Belli reflejó el sandinismo en sus obras, y en La mujer habitada (1998) marca el papel de la nicaragüense durante la revolución. De la misma manera, Claribel Alegría representó la mujer revolucionaria salvadoreña en su novela testimonial No me agarran viva (1983). El propósito de este trabajo es demostrar como las obras reescriben la historia para reivindicar a la mujer como sujeto histórico en Nicaragua y El Salvador.*

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Identidad política, Subjetividad, Revolución Sandinista.*

### **Resumo**

*Na Nicarágua e El Salvador, as revoluções das décadas de 1970 e 1980 encerraram a era das*

*ditaduras militares, as mulheres redefinem sua identidade política por meio da participação revolucionária. Gioconda Belli abordou o sandinismo em suas obras e, em La mujer habitada (1998), marca o papel da nicaraguense durante a revolução. Do mesmo modo, Claribel Alegría representou a mulher revolucionária salvadorenha em seu romance No me agarran viva (1983). O objetivo deste trabalho é demonstrar como as obras reescrevem a história para reivindicar as mulheres como sujeitos históricos na Nicarágua e El Salvador.*

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

*Identidade política, Subjetividade, Revolução Sandinista.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Given the Nicaraguan prominence in the revolutionary plight of the seventies, Gioconda Belli and Claribel Alegría dedicated themselves to writing about the Central American revolutionary movements. On one hand, Belli had participated with the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*) in the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and her work had contributed to issues of love, sexuality, politics and revolution. On the other hand, the author Claribel Alegría (from El Salvador) had written about the revolutionary struggle of the FMNL (*Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional*).

In the same way, Alegría's literary involvement in the process of seeking subjectivity of Central American women was determined by two sociopolitical factors: political discourses of revolutionary power and patriarchal society. Belli's militancy in the FMNL and Alegría's contributions form a literary trajectory that must be analyzed to fulfill its purpose of remembering

the heroic work of men and women who gave their lives for the liberation of Nicaragua and El Salvador (Merril, 1993). This study provides insight into the process of seeking women's identity as a historical subject parallel to national liberation projects and contextualized in the two testimonial literary works: *No me agarran viva* (1983) y *La mujer habitada* (1998).

To explain the contribution of specific functions of testimonial discourses towards the construction of a national and individual identity, this research analyzes the testimonial functions of the denunciation of the categorization of women as "the other" of Linda Craft (1997), the representation of women in the novels of Laura Barbas-Rhoden (2003) and the reconstruction of the narrative by Margaret Randall (1994) in order to demonstrate how the literary works rewrite history to vindicate women as historical subjects for their revolutionary participation.

## 1.1. THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SUBJECT

Central American authors Gioconda Belli and Claribel Alegría have feminized in their work the revolutionary struggle of the seventies and eighties in Nicaragua and El Salvador based on the testimonial function of the denunciation of the categorization of women as the Other (Bosé y Acosta, 1995). Linda Craft in *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (1997), comments that the primary function of the testimonial discourse is the otherness produced by and for the Others. Central American writers such as Sergio Ramírez, Arturo Arias, Manlio Argueta, Gioconda Belli and Claribel Alegría responded to the political situation of their countries with testimonial novels and testimonies in an effort to rewrite history. Defined by Craft: "the Other in Central America includes women, political prisoners, homosexuals and the poor, as well as indigenous peoples" (1997, p. 52). To explain the contribution of the specific role of otherness in testimonial discourses, this work shows how the literary works *No me agarran viva: The Salvadoran woman in struggle* (1983) by Alegría and *La mujer habitada* (1988) by Belli, rewrite the struggle of guerrilla women to represent their search for historical subjectivity.

In the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, Central American women went through profound social and political changes, they went from a military dictatorship to socialism and then to Catholic neo-liberalism. These changes led women to explore their subjectivity and set new goals of equality as a citizen in society to define their political identity (Beverly y Zimmerman, 1990). Each government had its own ideology about the role of women in society and implemented it according to their ideology. Therefore, women needed to redefi-

ne themselves for each change of government, producing new leaders, forms and understandings in their organizations. Given the situation of socio-political adaptation of women, sociologist Maxime Molyneux in *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond* (2003), points out that:

This raises an important question about the relationship between socialist revolution and women's emancipation. For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new socialist state? (p. 40)

For example, women fought alongside men in Nicaragua for the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty. With the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution, a 36-year dictatorship ended, which gave way to the involvement of women in politics, the workforce and community service. But when the objectives had been achieved and the armed struggle ended, the result was a political destitution (and subsequent disillusionment) of women, they returned to their home, family and maternal activities. Which brings us to the question: how is this problem reflected in Central American literature?

Alegría and Belli react with a narrative of resistance to sociopolitical issues in texts that have continued a revolution "short of armed struggle in which the traditionally disenfranchised can educate, 'conscientize', persuade, and rally in order to cause changes" (Craft, 1997, p. 28). Barbas-Rhoden comments that:

Like the Boom novels, the narratives, of historical fiction by Alegría and Belli actively engage the turbulent past of Latin America .... Unlike them, they are woman-centered .... They unmask

the nineteenth-century narratives of liberal progress and paternalistic conservatism and reveal hidden motives in the shaping of modern nations. (2003, p. 14)

As a result, Belli and Alegría's novels confront the official discourse to criticize power discourses and, through fiction, continue the revolutionary struggle of women that was discontinued in the wake of triumph: "Decolonial literature-meaning not only anticolonial writing but that which makes a conscious move away from or out of colonialism -and culture today are attempting to gain the liberation that was never won" (Craft, 1997, p. 28). The two problems in their works are the revolutionary struggle of women and national liberation. The writers take up the history of their countries to reflect conflicts of revolution and question political leadership in Nicaragua with the Sandinista revolution and the civil war of 1981-1992 in El Salvador:

In the retelling of history Alegría and Belli challenge the accepted order of life in the isthmus. They also question the logic that justifies that order. They expose the politics behind divisions such as elite/popular, and literature/orality, and they bring into focus gendered dichotomies like public/private, passive/active, desired/desiring, which have been inscribed in the story of the past. (Barbas-Rhoden, 2003, p. 2)

Barbas-Rhoden (2003), clarifies that the texts written by women suffered from distribution deficiency, and that the advantage of the testimony was the reprimand caused by the Reagan administration. This administration issued the call of attention for sponsoring funds for the Contras, whose military operations consisted of terrorist attacks on civilian populations and caused abuses that violated the human

rights of the inhabitants of those areas due to the destruction of agricultural plantations, health centers, schools, power generating plants and industrial plants (Lancaster, 1992). This problem is reflected in the novels of Belli and Alegría, respectively.

Likewise, the contributions of journalist Margaret Randall have served to contextualize the use of memory in the testimony. She has done several studies, such as *Walking to the edge: essays of resistance* (1991) and *Sandino's Daughters. Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (1994), in which she compiles and analyzes testimonies of Nicaraguan women who fought in Sandinismo. In addition, she emphasizes the use of memory in testimonial discourse as an important element for women:

And memory is vital. It occupied a new, almost sacred, place in our writing; in our poetry, prose, essays, journalistic efforts. Even in our images; photography and other visual art forms. We came to understand how a retrieval of our own memory was essential, not simply for the language of our lives, but for the very meaning of that language, the nurturing of life itself. And so, we gave thought to ways in which we might uncover, discover, recreate the memories of those whose voices we passed on. It was not a matter of remembering more. It was a matter of remembering differently, unfettered by what men have deemed worthy of recording, unaltered by male interpretation, uncluttered by the male system of rewards of achievement according to their values. (Randall, 1994, p. 71)

Randall argues about the use of memory as the act of remembering that it occupies an important place in women's writing, since it cons-

tracts discourses that challenge and detach themselves from patriarchy and rewrites the history of women as historical subjects. With the emergence of testimony, this element begins to be used as we see in Belli and Alegría, not only to remember but also to recreate the memory of the revolutionary struggle and of what could have been.

In this environment of political changes, the socialist revolution sought the participation of women and entered into relations with interests that differed: on one hand the woman had the interest to emancipate herself and on the other the revolution wanted to consolidate power. Randall's process of "uncover, discover, recreate the memories of those whose voices we passed on" applied to the novels of Belli and Alegría resulted in texts as "memorials to the future" to rewrite the revolutionary participation of women and find out at what point the interests of women in the Sandinista revolution were considered and how they are reflected in the works.

## **1.2. NO ME AGARRAN VIVA (1983)**

From the narrative point of view, both works represent "the other" in the guerrilla woman. They sought a political identity to reveal their participation as a historical subject and show the extent to which the Sandinista revolution considered women's interests as a collective. In *No me agarran viva*, the author states in the prologue that the life of Eugenia is "exemplary model of self-denial, sacrifice and revolutionary heroism, is a typical and not exceptional case of many Salvadoran women who have dedicated their efforts and even their lives to fight for the liberation of his people" (Alegría, 1983, p. 7).

The story of the protagonist Eugenia is based on the life of Ana María Castillo Rivas, a com-

mander of the Popular Liberation Forces in El Salvador during the civil war of 1981-1992. In this work, the revolutionary functions and challenges of Eugenia in motherhood and family are portrayed. This work gives voice to many other fallen combatants, who also served in the political-military organizations of El Salvador and defined their identity in the revolutionary leadership.

On the other hand, in *La mujer habitada*, we see the Nicaraguan community of the late sixties and early eighties represented in the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. Belli portrays the Nicaraguan community preparing to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship and the woman starting in politics, which had been the exclusive terrain of men until that time. The novel reflects the beginning of a woman's involvement in a revolutionary heyday in the country, with hopes based on the promises of the revolution to consider women's interests, to improve the situation of subordination and general injustice to which they were subjected (Preble-Niemi, 2003).

As a result, it can be concluded that the two literary works show a long and slow process of raising women's awareness within a strongly patriarchal society. From their military and political participation, they rewrite history to vindicate women as historical subjects through their revolutionary participation.

In *No me agarran viva*, Alegría recreates the revolutionary history of women through the life of Eugenia not only as a revolutionary combatant, but also as a wife and a mother, combining the two roles of militancy and motherhood (Salgado, 2003).

As for the format of the novel that includes the elements of narrative, testimony and interview, this work provides information about Eugenia that she can no longer give us but her family,

friends and companions in the battle testify for her and mark the extent of the struggle of a nation. As Laura Barbas-Rhoden comments in *Writing Women in Central America* (2003), the novel offers “multiple interpretations of the identity of a Eugenia, including commentary by those who knew her as a student, daughter, revolutionary, wife, mother and leader” (2003, p. 36). Like Lavinia, Eugenia exercises the national commitment to the revolutionary struggle but its challenges have to do with being a mother and wife.

Eugenia observes her surroundings, realizes that her country was going through a problem and thinks that she should contribute to solving it: “From the first moment she could clearly see that work had to lead to armed struggle” (Alegría, 1983, p. 41). In one of her missions, she increased her sensitivity due to the injustice and the misery she saw, also accompanied by the entire racial issue in relation to the natives. Lavinia also focuses on the great concern to solve the root problem and wonders:

Why do our people live in this situation of injustice? Why do our people have to endure exploitation? She begins to think about that contradiction between the rich and the poor, between the exploiters and the exploited, between the oppressors and the oppressed. She begins to realize that no one can solve the problem if it is not the people themselves. (Alegría, 1983, p. 28)

This conflict leads her to think that she must fight first for her country. This process defines her political subjectivity as a desire that is complemented by her main cause: the people.

Regarding the role of women in the revolution, Commander Eugenia considered that “in capitalism the woman was crushed, raped, usurped, and the only expectation she had to be-

come a woman was to join the struggle for a new society, a socialist society. The liberation of women goes along with the socialist triumph” (Alegría, 1983, p. 85). Regarding the Salvadoran revolutionary participation, Eugenia comments that women were given greater support to develop in the struggle:

From the beginning in the statutes, and not only in the statutes but in practice, the “Popular Liberation Forces” have always advocated the participation of women in the revolution, and specifically in the organization. Not to use women only as a collaborator, but as a combatant, as a leader. (Alegría, 1983, p. 80)

Through the revolutionary participation of women, the Popular Liberation Forces begin to break the existing strong gender barriers by allowing them to hold various positions, some of considerable importance, and resolve the situation of freedom in their country.

Eugenia's first challenge as a revolutionary was found in motherhood, when she becomes pregnant and the doctor recommends a month of rest but her “work spirit and the understanding of her tasks made her look for all possible ways not to abandon them. She said that her pregnancy, despite the dangers, could not remove her from her duties, that she had to combine the problems of pregnancy with the problems of war” (Alegría, 1983, p. 87).

Additionally, Eugenia comments on her role as a mother, her longing in motherhood and her experience with her militant companions. It was a community in which they supported each other with the care of children in case of absence for their revolutionary functions. For example, when Commander Eugenia had her daughter, Ana Patricia, and with the war Eugenia's responsibilities had tripled, she spent less time

with her daughter and the farewells were sad (Alegría, 1983, p. 13). It was impossible for her to maintain a daily relationship with her daughter in daily life. Many times her revolutionary activities forced her to ask for help from other partners, generally leaving her in the hands of the "aunts" of the organization, which came to be the title of the companions who lent themselves to care for the children of other women.

The second challenge that Eugenia faced was to serve as commander and wife at the same time. Their marriage relationship was affected, since she did not spend time with Javier, her husband. They were together for seven years, four of living in hiding. The last time Eugenia had seen him, she could only spend two and a half hours with him. Eugenia was also the head of the Services Department of the General Staff of the Front (Alegría, 1983, p. 14), so Javier took care of their daughter when she went on missions. As for motherhood, Eugenia says that:

It is not contradictory to be a mother. The comrades are formed in such a way that they even say, well, I am going to leave my son in the hands of my comrade while I complete my tasks. There have been cases in which we found a comrade struggling changing diapers, but he considers it as an obligation. We can't sweep machismo overnight, but it's disappearing. (Alegría, 1983, p. 8)

Likewise, we cannot hide the fact that not all men could or were willing to complement their revolutionary activities with the responsibilities of housework, the undesirable domestic tasks that many prefer to ignore. Each case was different, but we will not delve into the issue of machismo here. However, it is interesting to see how Eugenia and others like her faced this challenge by committing their husbands to assume

parental responsibilities in order to maintain their marital relationship and political identity.

### 1.3. LA MUJER HABITADA (1988)

*La mujer habitada* (1988) is Belli's first novel that marks a series of orphan protagonists, outside the patriarchal line and in search of their subjectivity. In Belli's narrative, the protagonists face their lack of cultural or biological antecedents and establish a connection with their indigenous past or with the memory of their mothers. On this, Barbas-Rhoden, in *Writing Women in Central America*, notes that:

All of Belli's narratives share a concern with coming of age and are stories of limitations, rebellion and a quest for identity and subjectivity. And despite the differences among Belli's fiction, there is one recurring narrative throughout: the confrontation of women of their lack of history and their search for empowerment through a connection with their past. (2003, p. 49)

This process of connection with the past is repeated in the protagonists throughout the novels and is caused by the absence of a cultural or biological background in order to get out of the marginalization crisis.

The novel unfolds the story of Lavinia and Itzá and the parallel of their revolutionary struggles. Itzá inhabits symbolically in the orange tree of the house of Lavinia. When the fruits are born, Lavinia drinks their juice and Itzá enters her. In the context of the novel, Itzá was an indigenous woman who fought and resisted during the Spanish conquest. Once Itzá inhabits Lavinia's veins, it gives her strength and impels her to continue the revolutionary struggle of her ancestors. Both protagonists have abandoned their parents to start an independent life and reject the passivity of women around them. In

her union with Itzá, Lavinia begins her identity search process and her revolutionary participation on a Sunday breakfast morning. The story of the Itzá and Yarince couple and their struggles in the Spanish conquest serves Lavinia as an inspiration to fight against every obstacle in her relationship with Felipe. Belli makes Lavinia constitute her political identity remembering a past shared by a collective (the indigenous struggle of the Spanish conquest). To fill her cultural emptiness and have a historical purpose, she seeks to get involved in the revolution (in the same way that Itzá did when she sought the struggle in the conquest).

In *La mujer habitada* we can see the revolutionary participation of women and the start of the process of a revolutionary heyday that begins to erase gender boundaries. Lavinia begins a path in revolutionary participation as a historical commitment and is proud to be an active participant in a national liberation project. To acquire the national commitment to join the revolutionary struggle, she follows certain steps in search of her historical subjectivity, which consist of observing her surroundings, exploring her subjectivity and defining her political identity.

Lavinia is marginalized because of her gender and has to resist against the discourses of power in the labor, political and social aspects. She faces differences with the men around her and this leads her into the dilemma of deciding whether to follow the patriarchal discourse or not. As a first step, Lavinia decides to observe the men around her and imitate them, or see if the differences in particular will help her. In her observation, Lavinia recognizes the areas of affectivity, authority and responsibility and grants the last two to men. This reflects the social belief that men have spent more time practicing them and that women have been raised and trained to be emotional and not exercise

authority. With this practice of observing the attitudes of men and the power they exercise, she begins to explore her own subjectivity.

As a second step, Lavinia self-analyzes and explores her subjectivity. She realizes her passive life without historical purpose and decides to change course. Her friend Flor shares her national commitment and giving her brochures of the revolution she says: "Now you will have to learn them by heart - she added - as a school lesson. At first they will sound exaggerated, extreme and strange precautions, but they are essential, not only for your own safety but for everyone's. Today begins your time to replace the "I" with the "we" (Belli, 1998, p. 143). This message from Flor symbolizes the desire of the revolution to join forces and overthrow the dictatorship.

Finally, Lavinia defines her political identity by joining the front. Her life now has revolutionary purpose and every area of her life is oriented and focused to support the national liberation project. As part of this project, Lavinia was assigned to lead a mission to replace her boyfriend Felipe, who dies suddenly. Felipe's death has two important meanings: 1. Demonstrate the need for the participation of women in the revolution, which criticizes the revolutionary agenda governed by men and 2. The beginning of a process of revolutionary participation that Lavinia has been looking for. As a result, Belli reconstructs the participation of women in the revolution in the novel and determines it as a historical subject. Although there is a claim in the novel by granting women their roles in politics, the hierarchy established by the patriarchy remains. This action reflects the revolutionary agenda governed by men and the hierarchy of power between the two, in which he commands. The death of Lavinia at the end of the novel symbolizes the permanence of women in the struggle, represented by the union of the



sap of the orange tree where Itzá is and the blood of Lavinia when she is buried at the foot of the tree. By joining these two elements, Lavinia does not die, but survives when her blood is reborn in nature, mixed with the sap.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Belli and Alegría relate the revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. Both reacted with a narrative of resistance to the socio-political problems of their countries. Their works arise as a result of the context of social oppression and revolutionary struggle. In the attempt to share common themes in the works of Belli and Alegría, we can conclude that both confront the discourses of power to continue the revolutionary struggle of women through fiction. The writers take up the history of their countries to reflect the conflicts of women in the revolution and to question the political leadership in Nicaragua with the Sandinista revolution and the civil war of 1981-1992 in El Salvador. The atmosphere of disillusionment and political destitution of women was the backdrop for these writers to criticize the patriarchal revolutionary leadership and raise a dialogue before the challenge of women to participate in the revolution as a national identity project.

The questions that arise from this study that may represent an extension to the analysis of the search for political identity of women and their role in the revolution and society are: What remains the social and political struggle of women who wanted a revolution? How is the process of resistance without violence associated with the revolution in the narrative? What are the struggles of women in Belli's current works? What narrative path has she taken in her recent works?

The search for revolutionary identity of women in Central America has been a process in moments of peace, resistance, violence and death. Literature is a gateway to understand these social and political processes of women in revolutions. The literary analysis of the testimonial function can contribute to the studies of Central American literature with an innovation linked to revolutionary socialist governments, the role of women in them and a critical evaluation of their participation, even in times of disillusionment.

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