

Contesting Patriarchy: The Characterization of Clara in *My Emerald Green Dress*

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Introduction

Upon reading *My Emerald Green Dress* (2010, originally published as *Mi vestido verde esmeralda* in 2003) by Alister Ramírez Márquez, it becomes evident early in the text that Clara, the novel's protagonist, is not the literary heir to Jorge Isaac's *María*. Although Clara shares María's humble origins, the former overcomes her circumstances and in fact manages to achieve social and financial prosperity. Moreover, Clara is not necessarily like other clearly defined female characters in novels written by Colombian authors. For example, Clara is often quite vocal, unlike her namesake in the novel *Prohibido salir a la calle* by Consuelo Triviño (1998). In an essay about the Triviño's work, Vilma Penagos states that it is "*Una construcción de la realidad que no propende por el despertar de una conciencia sino que pretende acallarla, domesticarla.*" (56) Unlike the child of Triviño's narrative, Clara's process of awareness takes place over and through vast amounts of time. However, one significant aspect of her character, her challenge to male authority, manifests itself from the very beginning of the work, and is present throughout her life.

Contesting Patriarchy : The Manifestations in Clara

In order to fully analyze Clara's recalcitrance with respect to patriarchy, one must first explore the connections among her thoughts, acts and words. To this end, the relationship between the physical and psychological terrains is both a significant and consistent presence whether in the context of undeveloped rural land or a more urban setting. In an article for *Geographical Review* entitled "A Place Unbecoming: The Coffee Farm of Northern Latin America", Robert Rice quotes D. Mitchell by stating that "As with any landscape, the coffee landscape is "never *entirely* stable" but is "always is a state of becoming." (555) The same could be said about Clara's emotional landscape in the sense that the process of her maturation is a perpetual one, and one that is neither entirely open nor completely closed. Furthermore, the correlation between Clara's physical trek through the rough Andean mountain terrain and her metaphysical journey of self discovery are pivotal themes of the narrative, and it is in the juxtaposition of these elements that one can gain insight into her private and shared emotional

domains simultaneously. Sometimes the reader is offered glimpses of these spheres offered in stark contrast to someone else's reality. In one particularly vivid example, her reaction to months of treacherous conditions is completely different from that of the other people who were with her, particularly Jesús, her husband. "I had an urgent need to get somewhere and dig myself into the ground like a cross, not to show that I was dead, but full of life. Jesús, however, insisted that we would be in Anserma in a matter of weeks. He laughed and said that a woman who didn't complain was a man." (24)

The spirit of these comments shows that Clara perceived Jesús as being dismissive of her emotional needs, yet she does not dwell on these. Instead, later in the novel, she shifts her attention to her aspirations in the material, practical realm. Nonetheless, before discussing this point in further detail, it is useful to address the critical context of female characterization because it sheds light on the representation of Clara.

Certain studies on the representation of women in fiction fall into diametrically opposite spheres insofar as they either perceive the author and the characters produced as a single intertwined entity, or alternatively, they completely separate the writer from the fictional individuals he or she creates. An example of the first conceptualization of author/character unity is patent in the introduction of a book entitled *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, edited by Beth Miller in 1983, in which she states that "...the majority of studies...have been devoted to female characterization in narrative works by peninsular Spanish male authors." (Miller 8) To a certain extent, *My Emerald Green Dress* offers a refreshing departure from this paradigm. It was not written in Spain, nor does it rely on Spain for any cultural or literary reference purposes as the novel relegates Spain to a mere fragment of a young girl's imagination. Furthermore, Colombia actually takes center stage, as do its conflicts and the reactions of the female protagonist, Clara, to the chaos that imbues her life on the personal and political levels throughout the work. However, although the author, Alister Ramírez Márquez, is not a peninsular Spaniard, he is male.

This fact might lead one to ask whether Miller's premise can be further partitioned. If the author's literary production and gender taken together are worthy of commentary, then one might ponder the role that these factors exert separately. Here, too, critics weigh in with clearly defined boundaries. For example, in *Ambiguity and Gender in the New Novel of Brazil and Spanish*

America (1993), Judith Payne and Earl Fitz state that “The male writer, composing his works from the culture and psychology of male experience, is likely to produce a text-and perhaps even establish a textual model-that differs considerably from the format of a text by a female writer composing out of her experience.” (Payne and Fitz 164) The strength of this argument can vary widely depending on the works chosen to support or refute it. For example, if one compares the narrative approaches of two contemporary novels by Chilean writers, Payne and Fitz seem to have a case in point. Antonio Skármeta’s *Match Ball* can be said to represent the quintessential male gaze whereas Isabel Allende’s *De amor y de sombra* (1984) offers a completely different exemplar.

Ramírez Márquez’s Clara lives in a world in which there is no room for the eroticism of Skármeta’s libidinous Sophie and her two lovers. According to Gordana Yovanovich, *Match Ball* is a type of picaresque novel (6), and clearly *My Emerald Green Dress* cannot be categorized as such. Nor is Clara particularly romantic as one could describe Allende’s Irene. On the other hand, the teamwork between Clara and Jesús early in the novel does provide evidence of the portrayal of an achievable if temporary harmony between the sexes, even in the early stages of her marriage to Jesús. However, Ramírez Márquez’s Clara does not completely accept Jesús’s authority. Instead, she challenges aspects of it through the novel, as she does male authority in general.

For example, from the first three sentences in the novel, we are made aware that Clara is motherless, and that her father is unable to take care of her. Yet in spite of not having a mother, she does not surrender naming rights to either her father or priest who baptized her “Ana María Ramona Clarisa” (1), but rather supports her aunt’s choice, as she was the one who always called her Clara. Therefore, Ramírez Márquez establishes a certain rejection of the masculine figures such as Clara’s father and the Priest who is just that, but does not have either his own name, nor is he “Father so and so”, in favor of the feminine. By the author referring to him as “The priest of Angelópolis”, Ramírez Márquez implies to a certain extent that the priest is replaceable, and although he is not completely anonymous, he is also not noteworthy, nor is he distinct from the persons who occupied that post before him as well as those who shall follow him.

The rejection of the potential masculine power expressed in the beginning of the novel is an illustration of the association between trustworthiness and the feminine gender which is established when Clara reinforces her year of birth because her cousin Venicia tells her the exact date, and Clara believes her. “When I brought my cousin Venicia and her husband to these lands, she told me I was born in 1900, and I believed her.” (1) Ramírez Márquez, in these few words, is actually negating the priest’s authority, the father’s presence in the birth, and the church’s ability or that of any governmental agency to provide a document that resembles a birth certificate. He is essentially reinserting the feminine figure into the birth via Venicia. In so doing, he is bringing back to life the mother Clara lost, or at a very minimum, a feminine maternal figure.

If Clara can be said to have rejected the priest’s dominance at the baptism by favoring the feminine, later in the novel, when needed, she availed herself of a priest. She went from being an abused child/young woman to a person who accepted a marriage proposal on the condition that the union take place in a church. Therefore, one way of contesting patriarchy was to use it to her advantage when she thought it was appropriate or necessary.

In addition to her nuanced reactions to male dominance, Ramírez Márquez establishes Clara’s instinctive trust of women over her mistrust of men. After all, women were her nursed her back to health on two separate occasions. The first time was after experiencing physical and emotional violence by Domingo, and Doña Nicasia prepares her special blend of pigeon broth. The second occurrence is after giving birth when Mónica sends her pigeon broth. The women here are depicted as being nurturing, having solidarity, valuable knowledge and the willingness to share these qualities.

Another way of interpreting Clara’s trust of the feminine over the masculine can be seen in her relationship to money throughout the novel, which point to Ramírez Márquez’ use of traditional and nontraditional elements in her characterization. Clara’s childhood is not exempt from material hardship, and although life does not provide her with opportunities in an academic space, Clara has confidence in her ability to understand arithmetic. “After repeating “one piece of coal plus one piece of coal “over and over again in school so many times, I grasped the power of addition, and was able to keep track at home of exactly how many cornmeal cakes I made and how many eggs the hens laid in a month.” (2) This later becomes discipline in terms of saving money, and develops further into a shrewd business mind. Her multiple successful investments

throughout the years provide further proof of her quantitative talents. Here, too, one can see the intricate interconnections between and among her words, deeds and refusal to accept male dominance without questioning it, and at times in fact appropriating it. As they start to build a life together, she claims that “Only Jesús and I knew where we had our money buried in the woods.” (58) However, two paragraphs later she states that “Without his knowledge, I made the deal and paid the Bustamante brothers with ten bamboo piggy banks, two hundred hens and a rooster that I threw in.” (59) The so called “deal” was for acquisition of land. The fact that Clara hid her real financial situation from her husband is extremely noteworthy. Once again, Ramírez Márquez is incorporating elements of orthodoxy and revolt through his treatment of the material aspects of her life. One wonders whether Clara’s hiding her money from Jesús is a way of rebelling against his infidelity. If he is unaware of her money, he cannot access it to spend it at Monica’s brothel, for example.

Interestingly, it is only when her lands are confiscated and she must wage quite a battle to recover them that the reader learns of her surname by marriage. Invoking the paternal ancestry is a technical necessity in signing a letter, which is a further indication of Clara defining herself in her own terms as opposed to depending completely on men to fight her battles. Once again, Ramírez Márquez uses elements of tradition and innovation. Clara reclaims the patriarchal name, and uses a conventional method, i.e., a letter, but the letter itself is a form of protest, and is unusual because the writer is a woman.

Although Clara utilized her married name to sign a letter, she does distance herself from Jesús as she revisits his persistent infidelity on her deathbed when Ramírez Márquez completely appropriates patriarchal privilege by her statement that if she had to do it all over, that is the one thing she would change. “I wouldn’t tolerate my husband’s infidelities. I would castrate him like a bull if I had to be miserable because of him.” (162) It is also ironic that she must die after the realization that she should not have tolerated Jesús’ unfaithfulness. When she was younger, she saw Jesús’s escapades with other women as indiscretions, yet as an older person, she sees them as betrayals.

Conclusion

My Emerald Green Dress is a narrative in which the reader is forced to understand that although she has been able to overcome many formidable obstacles, and has done an admirable job of contesting patriarchy, Clara cannot circumvent death. Her capabilities and thresholds for handling physical and emotional pain are noteworthy, as is her overall spirit, and her rejection of masculine dominance and privilege. However, readers need not fear that post Clara female characters in Colombian literature will surrender to patriarchal privilege easily. In fact, Ramírez Márquez continues to draw attention to these themes through the female protagonist named Virginia in his second novel, *Los sueños de los hombres se los fuman las mujeres* (2009).

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