

SEXUAL ACTIVITY: SEX AS A SYMBOL OF REVOLUTION  
IN GIOCONDA BELLI'S WRITING

---

Author:

Annabel Lau

Faculty Sponsor:

Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle,

Department of English

---

**ABSTRACT**

Through her literary works, Nicaraguan poet, author, and revolutionary Gioconda Belli employs graphic images of sex and the female body in an effort to empower women and stir up a revolution against inequality in the realms of sexuality, reproductive health, and politics. A woman who is highly in tune with her sexual needs, Belli has an inclination toward eroticism in her writing, which she uses to put forth her views of feminism and social equality. Believing that women are entitled to sexual gratification and exploration equal to that of males, Belli glorifies the female anatomy in her works, presenting the female sex as a beautiful, sensual being to be celebrated, not shamed or constrained by predetermined social constructs. Depicting encounters with injustice and discrimination in the field of reproductive health, Belli exposes the trauma, health issues, and indignity that women often receive in the medical setting regarding their sexual health, demanding that reforms be made for women's reproductive rights. Finally, Belli uses images of sexuality and sensuality for political purposes in her work, particularly metaphors of sexual intercourse to represent the political revolution against the Somoza dictatorship transpiring in her home country of Nicaragua. In her novel, *The Inhabited Woman*, her memoir, *The Country Under My Skin*, and her poetry anthology, *From Eve's Rib*, Gioconda Belli strives to empower women sexually and politically by using graphic imagery of sex as a medium to inspire the idea of revolution.

**INTRODUCTION**

Gioconda Belli employs vivid imagery of sex, particularly from a female perspective, to combat the social stigmas involved with female sexual gratification. Lavinia, the protagonist in *The Inhabited Woman*, is a very sensual woman who takes pride in her feminine form. She takes her time in the shower each morning, "[enjoying] scrubbing the soap along her skin until foam embroidery clung to her naked body," because "she liked to see her pubic hair turn white, liked to inspect the body that had mysteriously been assigned to her for an entire lifetime" (*The Inhabited Woman* 33). Lavinia enjoys exploring her body during sexual activity, discovering new ways to bring it pleasure. She discovers during her encounters with Jerome, a former lover, that her body could "make sounds which linked her to cats, panthers, and jaguars from her tropical forests" (*The Inhabited Woman* 33), acknowledging the very primal and natural instinct of sexual desire, which women were all too often expected to suppress. Belli, and Lavinia, as a result, understand and loathe the social constructs that force women to remain submissive during sexual intercourse. As independent and sexually liberated as Lavinia is, even she is unable to escape the predetermined gender roles set forth by her society when she is making love with her partner, Felipe; although their sex is consensual, Felipe asserts his masculinity by forcefully undressing Lavinia and dominating their movements in bed, not allowing her much choice or freedom of expression during the act. When their lovemaking has concluded, although Lavinia feels physically satisfied, she cannot help but to feel a little unsettled with Felipe's aloofness. Even as Felipe affectionately kisses her, she can sense that her emotions and her sexual needs are not being considered. "Look at me... Do you see me?" (*The Inhabited Woman* 40) she asks, to which her partner responds lightheartedly with a comment that once again draws the attention to *his* sexual needs. In response to Lavinia's concerns of being ignored, Felipe insensitively jokes that he would have to "prescribe cold showers for [himself] in order to stand the office" (*The Inhabited Woman* 40) if they had not consummated their desire that night. These phallogocentric views are further exemplified through the diction that Belli chooses to use when Felipe and Lavinia have sexual intercourse. Belli uses delicate nature imagery when she writes about Lavinia's body, describing

“the private petals that Felipe plucked each time he entered deeper and deeper in her most intimate self, kneeling to open her legs and gaze at her moist sex, drink from it like a cup of pollen” (*The Inhabited Woman* 111). On the other hand, when writing about Felipe’s actions during the couple’s lovemaking, Belli uses war imagery, describing how “his mouth laid siege to [Lavinia’s tiny tower of pleasure] with an army of spears, conquering her entire flesh” (*The Inhabited Woman* 112). Lavinia acknowledges that she is being “conquered” by Felipe in bed; Belli states this plainly in the paragraph following the couple’s sex: “But she could not penetrate him” (*The Inhabited Woman* 112). Lavinia, as a woman, could not penetrate Felipe – not with her body, and at the moment, certainly not with her mind. The characteristic “macho” need to possess a woman in bed is demonstrated once again when Lavinia returns from a party and hints to Felipe that other men had shown an interest in her, arousing an overwhelming sense of jealousy within him. “He didn’t seem to care much what she had thought... He emanated insecurity beneath the apparent indifference he pretended while he fell into the soft sensuality of somnolence to seduce her, to make love to her frantically and violently and thus feel that he possessed her, avenging himself on the boleros and other rhythms” (*The Inhabited Woman* 238). Interestingly, Belli acknowledges that this characteristically male need to dominate is driven, not by power and strength, but rather, insecurity and weakness.

### OVERCOMING OPPRESSION

Belli empowers her female characters sexually by allowing them to overcome the sexual oppression they have been subjected to by men and by giving them a voice in their sexual experiences. A powerful but often overlooked part of the novel is Felipe’s first sexual encounter with a prostitute named Terencia. Described as having a beautiful smile and a sense of humor, Terencia enjoyed “watching [Felipe] unzip his pants nervously, as if she felt she possessed some ancient power” (*The Inhabited Woman* 135). It was only when Felipe was about to enter her, “overflowing at the mere thought of being between a woman’s legs, feeling the warm, moist tunnel enclosing his sex like a cobweb” (*The Inhabited Woman* 135), that she forcefully pushed him off of her and growled, “Now you know what it’s like, now you can feel like a man” (*The Inhabited Woman* 135). In this instance, Belli places all of the power in Terencia’s hands; she is a woman, and though she has a career that is typically not respected, *she* is in control of her body and whom she chooses to have sex with.

Similarly, despite being “owned” by Felipe in their past sexual encounters, Lavinia eventually learns to take control of her lovemaking with Felipe, instructing him on ways to pleasure her. “She liked Felipe to enter the slow rhythm of a time without haste. She had had to teach him to enjoy caresses in slow motion, the long, drawn out foreplay to reach the point of desperation until the dikes of patience burst, and the provocation and flirting shifted to passion” (*The Inhabited Woman* 289). At this point, Lavinia finally breaks free of the oppression Felipe had subjected her to and takes ownership of her own sexual experience. No longer a mere spectator in sexual intercourse, she is an active participant – even an instructor.

Belli also conveys that idea that women can be in control of their sexual involvements through her explicit, erotic poetry written from a female perspective. She begins her poem, “Knowledge of You” with a strong affirmation: “I want to taste / your strong, salty flesh” (“Knowledge of You” 1-2). The narrator of the poem asserts her rampant desire to play an active role in sexual intercourse – to taste, not to *be* tasted. By expressing her desires to “encircle [his] mouth / until [she] can possess [his] saliva, [his] breath” (“Knowledge of You” 33-34), she establishes that no longer wants to be a passive object of sexual oppression. Instead, she wants to possess him, to take ownership of some of the most personal elements of his physical existence. Belli concludes her poem by comparing the passion of the sex to the waves of the sea; both lovers end up washed ashore, “sweaty and spent / on linen sands” (“Knowledge of You” 40-41). Because both partners are sexually satisfied, their implied simultaneous orgasm signifies a successful act of sexual intercourse. Belli’s vivid imagery and choice of diction are employed in an attempt to inspire her female readers to take an active role in their sexual experiences and to demand sexual fulfillment.

Through her own personal experiences, as well as those of the female characters she invents, Gioconda Belli demonstrates her contempt with the way that the female body and reproductive health are viewed in Latin American society during Somoza’s reign. She combats the injustices that women were

subjected to in terms of their bodies and their health through exposition. Throughout her writing career, Belli often chose to write about topics that are considered embarrassing, scandalous, and shameful, particularly ones dealing with the female body and its natural processes. In her poem titled "Menstruation," she starts off blatantly with, "I've got / 'the curse' / of women" ("Menstruation" 1-3). Mentioning hormonal imbalances, cramps, and headaches, Belli is stating plainly that menstruation is not an aspect of sexual health that women generally find enjoyable. However, despite its unpleasantness, "Each month / this joining / of body / and soul" ("Menstruation" 8-11) is still an inevitable, profound and almost spiritual part of being a woman, and of that, she is proud. Confronted by her aunt about how "embarrassing" her poems about menstruation were, Belli retorts, much to her aunt's horror, with "Embarrassing? Why should I be embarrassed?" (*The Country Under My Skin* 37) In addition, despite experiencing unwanted advances from men with "glazed eyes," and even as her poetry was labeled "vaginal poetry" and "shameless pornography" by the Managuan society in the early 1970's, Belli continued to defend and to take pride in her work, justifying it as "a female celebration of her senses, the wonder of her body" (*The Country Under My Skin* 38). As Kumaraswami and Thornton found, Belli attempted to counter the "reductionist" mindset that women's sexual organs serve the sole purpose of reproduction by lauding them as instruments of pleasure and self-fulfillment instead (Kumaraswami & Thornton, 2007). Belli was not at all deterred by the criticism that her poetry received; in fact, she reveled in it, realizing that it was just another way to upset the establishment of Nicaraguan society at the time.

In recounting the horrifying experience in the hospital with the birth of her son, Belli exposes the disrespectful and infantilizing manner in which women were treated regarding their sexual health and reproductive decisions. When Belli was at a hospital for an emergency cesarean section following the rupture of her amniotic sac, she was met with negligent medical care, misinformation or lack of information altogether, and terrible dispositions from the doctors and medical staff. She reports that the female patients were treated as "whiny, spoiled brats," and when she had finally had enough of their mistreatment, she complained blatantly to the doctor in charge, "Please, do me the favor of treating me like a human being. I'm not stupid. I went to school. I know my body. I don't need you to simplify things. The way you treat women here is an insult" (*The Country Under My Skin* 189). To make matters worse, she received contradicting reports from various staff members regarding the survival of her child, a highly traumatic and unnecessary episode due to lack of attention and care on the medical staff's behalf.

Belli's dissatisfaction with the way that female reproductive health is regarded is exemplified in her choice to bring Lucretia, Lavinia's servant, to the hospital because of hemorrhaging from an illegal botched abortion that nearly took her life. In Nicaragua, a country where abortion is completely illegal under the Criminal Code of 1974 (Molymoux, 1988), Lucretia was left with limited options; the man who had impregnated her threatened to abandon both her and the baby, and she knew that on her meager servant's salary, she would not have the means to support a child. Realizing that she could get arrested for seeking an illegal abortion, Lucretia initially refuses to go to the hospital, choosing a slow, excruciating death instead. As Lavinia walks through the gynecological ward and is met with women whose "insides [were] torn apart by botched abortions" (*The Inhabited Woman* 179), she begins to empathize with their agony, engendered by their lack of reproductive rights. Barbas-Rhoden claims, "For Belli's protagonists, maternity is not a biological imperative, but a choice conditioned by personal preferences and historical contingencies" (Barbas-Rhoden, 2003). Although their wombs protest, both Lavinia and Itzá—a 16<sup>th</sup> century warrior-woman whose spirit lives on in a tree in Lavinia's yard—decide that, because of the political climate of their times and the uncertainty that looms over their heads, it would not be the right choice to bring children into the world. However, they still have that choice; others are not as privileged. Belli discusses these experiences in the gynecological ward to bring attention to the deficiencies, inefficiencies, and unprofessionalism found within the system, imploring for a societal and institutional change in which women are respected and involved in their reproductive decisions.

Belli utilizes sexual imagery in order to empower women to get involved in political revolutions that combat the class and gender discriminations they face. Belli's memoir tells of how her first search for sexual fulfillment outside of her passionless marriage allowed her to discover a cause that would become a part of her political identity. Her torrid love affair with a man she calls "the Poet," which left the couple "smelling of sex, [their] hair tousled and eyes aflame" (*The Country Under My Skin* 39), introduced her to

## A. LAU: SEX AS A SYMBOL OF REVOLUTION

the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, or Sandinista National Liberation Front, in which she would become an active participant.

Belli particularly blends sexual and political imagery in her poetry. Her poem, "What Are You Nicaragua?" appears to be written from the point of view of someone who has just recently been disillusioned by the inequalities and injustices found within a place she holds close to her heart. In the poem, Belli personifies her homeland as a woman, comparing the country's mountainous terrain to "a woman's breasts made of earth / smooth, pointed and threatening" ("What Are You Nicaragua?" 14-15), and the cries of its people to "screams like those of women in labor" ("What Are You Nicaragua?" 21). As she concludes her poem with "What are you Nicaragua / to hurt me so?" ("What Are You Nicaragua?" 24-25), Belli questions and laments the fact that something so similar to her – something so close to home – could cause her so much pain. How could Nicaragua, a woman herself, put her own sisters through such torment? These conflicting views of pride and disappointment, the juxtaposition of idyllic nature and female imagery to the "clenched fist and loaded gun" ("What Are You Nicaragua?" 23) in Nicaragua brings Belli to acknowledge the conflicting natures of her country: that it could play the role of both the oppressed and the oppressor.

In the poem, "Dressed in Dynamite," Belli employs graphic sexual imagery to describe the books that lay on her bed: "And the books / spread out on my bed are like men I've made love with in an / orgy of legs and arms that awaken my passion for life, / biting my nipples, my sex, and filling me with a special / semen made from letters fecundating me" ("Dressed in Dynamite" 5-9). Belli expresses that her love for words is so passionate that it can be likened to sexual intercourse; it excites her, rekindles her passion for life, and impregnates her with knowledge. However, as much as she would prefer to stay in the comfort of her home, "making love" to her books, she has a duty to fight for the oppressed – those who will continue to live out dreaded, monotonous existences until social justice is achieved. Instead of covering themselves up in the typical feminine dress and makeup prescribed by a consumer society, Belli asserts that women must instead "dress [themselves] up in dynamite" ("Dressed in Dynamite" 17-18) – morally right and capable of being just as feminine.

In "Nicaragua Water Fire," Belli compares her home country to a victim of rape who refuses to remain helpless and instead chooses to hunt her rapist. "Nicaragua my love my raped child / getting up straightening her skirt / walking behind her murderer following him / down the mountain up the mountain" ("Nicaragua Water Fire" 26-29). By personifying a country as a woman who has been sexually assaulted but refuses to remain a victim, Belli demonstrates that women are not constrained to remaining passive objects and can choose to play the role of the aggressive subject instead, in both sexual intercourse and politics. By "transforming the female image from passive to active; by correcting, in summary, the powerful gender stereotypes that exist in [their] culture" (Ghosh & Bose, 1997), women are able to bring about profound cultural and political change within their country. Belli's choice to portray Nicaragua as a woman is meant to engender this very change, to empower women to take a stand against the abuse and oppression that they face within their own country, both as women and as citizens.

### CONCLUSION

In her novel, *The Inhabited Woman*, her memoir, *The Country Under My Skin*, and her poetry anthology, *From Eve's Rib*, Gioconda Belli utilizes eroticism and vivid descriptions of the female body in order to empower women and to create a revolution against social injustice in the areas of sexuality, reproductive health, and politics. Belli writes to eliminate the social stigmas connected with female sexual desire and gratification. She seeks to expose the sexual oppression that women are often forced to face in their sexual relations, and in turn, inspires women to play an active role in their own sexual pleasure. In addition, Belli strives to expose and criticize the subpar, or at times, nonexistent, reproductive healthcare and knowledge that women are provided access to. Finally, by blending sexuality and politics in her writing, Belli seeks to motivate women to get involved with politics and to take a stand against injustice in their home countries. Gioconda Belli aspires to transform and change the lives of women by empowering them to embrace their sexualities and to stage a revolution, whether it may be in the sexual, reproductive, or political sphere.

**ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

---

Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. *Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003. Print.

This book examines different Latin American women writers and their individual journeys and struggles to represent themselves in a male-dominated society. Specific to my topic, the book cites instances in which Belli celebrates the female body, lauding it as a symbol of sensuality, intelligence, and empowerment, while men in her society denounce it as a symbol of shame and temptation. It also speaks about the choices that Belli's characters are given in regard to motherhood and reproductive health. I will also use the source to understand Belli's struggle to overcome the social stigmas associated with her gender and sexuality.

Belli, Gioconda, and Kristina Cordero. *The Country under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. Print.

This book is Gioconda Belli's memoir, in which she discusses various pivotal moments in her life that defined who she is as a writer, revolutionary, mother, and woman. I will cite various examples where she explains her views and experiences regarding sexuality and the female body, and how sex influenced her in terms of feminism, reproductive healthcare, and politics.

Belli, Gioconda, and Kathleen N. March. *The Inhabited Woman*. Willamantic, CT: Curbstone, 1994. Print.

This book is Gioconda Belli's novel that often mirrors her own experiences in the Sandinista revolution. Belli tells the story of Lavinia, a refined, upper-class woman who is suddenly exposed to the inequalities of her land and chooses to join a movement that promises to fight the injustice and fight for the oppressed. I will use this book as my main source, citing examples in which sexuality defines or transforms the female protagonists in the novel.

Belli, Gioconda, and Steven F. White. *From Eve's Rib*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1993. Print.

This book is an anthology of Belli's poetry, in which most poems deal with sexuality and the human body or the Sandinista movement. I will cite lines from specific poems such as "Menstruation," "What Are You Nicaragua?," "Dressed in Dynamite," and "Knowledge of You" in order to convey Belli's fascination with the female body, in addition to proving how sexuality factors into greater themes such as political and feminist revolution.

Ghosh, Bishnupriya, and Brinda Bose. *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film*. New York: Garland, 1997. Print.

This book describes the struggles and accomplishments of feminist figures in third world countries. It cites a specific work of Belli in which she combines sexuality with politics in Nicaragua. Personifying her country as a victim of rape, Belli describes the pure bliss and empowerment of a woman defending herself, pursuing her attacker, and having a voice of her own. I will use this specific example in my research to examine Belli's choice to compare the political situation in Nicaragua to a crime as graphic as rape, in addition to her obvious motives to empower women and victims of sexual crimes.

Kumaraswami, Par, and Niamh Thornton. *Revolucionarias: Conflict and Gender in Latin American Narratives by Women*. Oxford: P. Lang, 2007. Print.

This book examines Gioconda Belli's fascination and celebration of the female body and how she portrays the body as a sense of self in her works. It also claims that Belli and her contemporaries sought to combat

## A. LAU: SEX AS A SYMBOL OF REVOLUTION

gender stereotypes and the “reductionist” mindset that women’s sex organs are meant only for biological purposes. I will use this source to examine the ways in which Belli approaches and presents the human body in her work, as well as the way in which she combats societal expectations by bringing female sexual gratification into the picture.

Molyneux, Maxine. "The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua: Revolutionary Pragmatism, or Feminism in the Realm of Necessity?" *Feminist Review* 22.Summer (1988): 114-32. Print.

This article discusses the various politics involved in regards to abortion in Nicaragua. It states that although Nicaragua’s government has implemented various reforms to establish a greater sense of equality between genders, abortion is still considered illegal under the Criminal Code of 1974. I will use this source to examine the politics of abortion in Nicaragua and how it affects women’s choices in their reproductive health.