

BODIES OF A PERSONAL AND NATIONAL HISTORY, EMPHASIZING THE INHERENT FEMINIST WARRIOR: GIOCONDA BELLI'S *THE INHABITED WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout Latin America's history, imperialism has led to the development of controlling and despicable autocracies. Primarily, freedom of choice, speech, and political ideology. Specifically, Nicaragua suffered a long, debilitating political autocracy underneath the Somoza reign. In this paper, I will correlate Nicaragua's history with the novel Gioconda Belli's *The Inhabited Woman*, asserting that though the plot is set in a fictitious country, it draws inspiration from Nicaragua's history, as well as the author's personal experiences. This research paper will draw from historical sources as well as literary ones to assert that through the author's personal experiences in Nicaragua and Nicaragua's personal history this novel ultimately asserts the challenge of gender stereotypes as seen in the consistent and constant juxtaposing narration styles. It is through the two narrators, Lavinia and Itza, that the audience sees Nicaragua's and Belli's personal history displayed, criticizing the gender roles of the time period and the shift beginning to occur within them, highlighting the inherent feminist warrior.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Latin America's history, Latin America has often been plagued with deplorable autocracies, ultimately limiting people's freedoms in extreme ways. Usually the most limited freedom was either freedom of speech or political ideology that differed from the dictator; and in a lot of cases, it was both. A prime example of this is the Somoza autocracy, taking militant control over Nicaragua from 1936 to 1979. Transpiring over three generations and considered to be this hemisphere's longest running dictatorship, this autocracy was known for being oppressive, repressing the people's voice, and often stripping them of their dignity. In a period of profound change, poetry and literature flourished, following the trend of profound change and upheaval. Coinciding with these times of upheaval and literary change, women began to step into more leadership roles, leaving behind the idea of being submissive to men and the patriarchal system. Encapsulating these ideas of change in a gender and literary sense, Gioconda Belli writes of a revolution in a novel, which mirrors the one occurring in Nicaragua, called *The Inhabited Woman*. Taking place within a fictitious country, Faguas, Belli details the life of Lavinia, a woman involved with architectural design, slowly becoming involved with the revolution around her. As she becomes more and more involved, she consequently also becomes inhabited by an ancestor and warrior, Itzá, after eating an orange from the tree she was inhabiting. With this, Lavinia begins to take on the role of a warrior within her own life, standing up to not only the autocracy, but also challenging the patriarchal systems around her. Though Nicaragua is not named as the location of this conflict and story, the conflict of the novel closely resembles the one within Nicaragua, as well as Lavinia closely resembling Belli. Within Gioconda Belli's novel, *The Inhabited Woman*, Belli alludes to and utilizes Nicaragua's rich history of revolution in order to assert the beginning of a shift in gender roles, as seen within her juxtaposing narrators, Lavinia and Itzá. Within these shifting narratives and narrations, Belli asserts that the desire for equality is embedded within revolutions—ultimately arguing that the challenge of gender roles is inherent to revolutions and women.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to fully understand the shift of gender roles, it is important to look at what happened after the fall of the Somoza dictatorship. After the fall of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, the Sandinista movement took control of the government, and with this new government, the desire for major change began to be called out by many. Specifically, women began to call for massive social change, asserting for society to view them as equals, and not a submissive apparition, but rather a meaningful strong force to be reckoned with, as well as heard. Written by Mona Lena Cook and Sarah Childs, *Women, Gender, and Politics* discusses these sentiments, Cook and Childs writing: "The Nicaraguan revolution also gave hope to those who also supported women's liberation, for her too, the Sandinistas were full of promise. The revolution occurred in the period after the upsurge of the 'new feminism' of the late sixties, at a time when Latin American women were mobilizing around feminist demands in countries like Mexico, Peru, and Brazil" (Cook, et al., 24). During its time of revolution women moved into an important part of the revolution, mobilizing in order to later push for their emancipation within society. Of course, there are labor reasons as to why emancipation for women is considered essential and better for society, as Cook and Childs discuss, but it is also to allow for them to become more educated—improving the literacy rate of the country. Coinciding with sentiments Belli writes of in her novel, Cook and Childs write: "More positively, women are also regarded as crucial agents of revolutionary change whose radicalization challenged ancient customs and privileges within the family, and has important effects on the next generation, throughout the impact on their children" (Cook, et al., 26). This is an integral theme within Belli's novel, mainly seen through the shifting of narratives and the personification of the orange that then inhabits Lavinia—ultimately aiding in her moral composition, revolutionizing her.

PERSONAL REVOLUTION

Shifting towards the book, similar to how women revolutionized and fought for emancipation after the revolution, Lavinia and Itzá consistently pushed back on stereotypical gender roles assumed for women during their own respective time periods. This is mainly evident through the juxtaposing narration, shifting between Itzá and Lavinia. It is through this shifting and juxtaposing narration style, Belli is able to emphasize not only how women are a necessity to revolutions, but how women began to reimagine the stereotypes and break them down. Stepping down from the traditional, submissive stereotype and beginning to become a powerful force to be reckoned with. Looking at the novel more specifically, there are multiple instances within it where Lavinia and Itzá are seen challenging male agency, or more specifically, the notion of machismo. With Lavinia, a momentous part of the novel is where Felipe states that Lavinia cannot join the movement simply because Lavinia is the shore, and he is the ocean. For if she were to join the movement, his shore would be lost, insinuating that Lavinia must stay in this virtuous and submissive role, listening to the push and pull of his waves (Belli 109). It is in the next couple of pages where Lavinia begins to challenge these ideas in her own mind, Belli writing: "She did not want to make Felipe the center of her life, to become a Penelope weaving the strands of night. But even so, in spite of herself, she saw how she was trapped in the age-old tradition: the woman in the cave waiting for her man during the hunt and the battle, fearful of the storm raging around her" (Belli 111). This idea of machismo having to be brandished and at the core of men's personalities is one that Lavinia begins to recognize and begins to question. It is through the short paragraph in Itzá's perspective, written in first-person language rather than Lavinia's third-person narration, where this shift is seen and begins to occur: the challenge of machismo. With this, Belli writes: "She is wrestling with her contradictions. Day after day I have felt her waver without managing to escape, unable to flee, like someone looking out over a cliff" (Belli 113). It is within this, where Belli insinuates and explains that the challenge, or wanting to challenge male agency has always been inherent to women. It is within certain moments that these shifts begin to occur...certain moments like revolutions. Following those sentences, Belli decides to make this insinuation explicit with the closing lines of Itzá's portion of narration, saying "She must live her own life; I am only the echo of a blood that also belongs to her" (Belli 114). It is here where Belli shows that the shift of these ideas within gender begins to occur, and it is inherent for women to show an opposition to the all-mighty machismo, challenging this idea entirely, and asserting the desire for this change to occur.

Coinciding with this, Gregory Stephens writes of similar sentiments in an article published by *Latin American Literary Review*, titled "Gioconda Belli on Women in Love and War: Unfinished

Revolutions and Revolutionary Process.” Within this, Stephens presents the argument that revolutions within women are unfinished, especially the attitudes, leaving that feeling to linger. In particular regards to what I discussed in the paragraph previously, Stephens writes: “Remembering this gives Lavinia food for thought about different possible orbits, as she rebels against the role of being Felipe’s ‘ribera del río’ (banks of his river), as he described it to her (118, 153). She wants to become ‘a principal rather than just agent,’ as Frederick Douglass once wrote” (Stephens 34). This idea that Stephens touches upon is this idea of machismo, and how it is deemed integral to society, oppressing women. And with this, Stephens insinuates that there is this unfinished revolution taking place within women. This unfinished revolution transcends multiple generations, inhabiting the next woman, giving her this fight and desire to challenge the status-quo. It is within times of social or military upheavals—revolutions, even—where these ideas come to fruition after being dormant for so long. And with the fruition of these ideas, the challenge of machismo becomes at the forefront of this social upheaval, causing women to become agents of change. This is seen in the novel, as well as in Belli’s own life, but is emphasized through these altering narratives. Stephens cites Belli’s life in the following paragraph, writing, “In her memoir, Belli reflects on how the revolutions sometimes inspired women by their mentor by their first ‘political crush’—take on a momentum and a direction of their own: ‘aunque el...hubiera detonado mi revolución interior ésta iba má allá de él y no estaba sujeta a una pareja’ (*El País*, 70)” (Stephens 135). Using her own life and implementing Nicaragua’s history in *The Inhabited Woman*, Belli creates a narrative that juxtaposes between first person narration and third person narration to emphasize how revolutions challenge the machismo ideology. Not only does it challenge this ideology, but also asserts how these revolutions are unfinished and multigenerational being handed down from generation to generation, citing that this is something inherent—challenging the patriarchy and gender roles. Ultimately, insinuating that women have this built-in desire to fight against brutish machismo, and fighting against those who are machistas—in other words, challenging the patriarchy due to this biological and generational inheritance.

WOMEN IN THE SOMOZA ERA

Reverting back to Nicaragua, specifically, to understand the sentiment of how challenging machismo is generational, and something subconscious until something provokes it, we must look back at pre-Sandinista revolution to the Somoza era. Within this era, many women found themselves in contradictory positions, often giving into the stereotypical woman: virtuous, sanctified femininity in order to support the men around them. Though this was the expectation, many women found themselves working, earning less than a man, but still transitioning to the idea of the “modern woman”. Victoria González-Rivera writes of the contradictory state women found themselves in during the Somoza dictatorship in her book, *Before the Revolution: Women’s Rights and Right-Wing Politics in Nicaragua*, specifically in the chapter titled: “Sex and Somocismo.” González-Rivera links the transition and evolution of the Nicaraguan woman not only to the expanding labor force, but also to U.S. cultural influence as well as imperialistic nature. Citing an “intellectual”, Francisco Palma Martínez, González-Rivera quotes one of his criticisms of women, Palma Martínez writing: “Now woman looks for a job and finds one, and she becomes economically independent. By doing this, she goes against natural law: woman was not made to work, she was made for the home, and to procreate. Where you like it or not; and don’t blame me for it, for I did not make her that way. Work is a disgrace for women” (González-Rivera 138). From this, González-Rivera links this to the expanding Somocista power within Nicaragua, stating that though they were still paid less than a man, it was still a new freedom. And with this new freedom, women began expanding and attempting to find new waters to attribute these freedoms to. By learning these new freedoms, women are going against the machismo way, and being a machista himself, González-Rivera obviously disagrees with this new “modern woman.” Though given these new freedoms, such as economic independence, there was still a profound sense of exploitation regarding women. Disagreeing with the Somoza state could be punishable by rape if you were a woman, as González-Rivera points out on page 136.

Continuing, it is within her conclusion where González-Rivera provides a specific understanding of what truly the Somoza-supporting woman was, simply another machista, allowing for brutish sexism

and stereotypical gender roles to flourish. It is within the Sandinista movement where this inherent trait to push against something so oppressive is seen. Concluding, González-Rivera writes:

...I feel it is important to reiterate that, although they claimed to not seek to alter traditional gender relations, making it difficult to speak of them as 'feminists.' Nonetheless, a handful of Somocista women, such as Amelia Borge de Sotomayor and Olga Núñez de Saballos, wrote extensively about feminism and toiled for decades on behalf of women's rights. Women like them tended to believe the Somozas were feminists. (González-Rivera 176).

It is here where we can see a contradictory dichotomy occurring within women, regardless of their patriarchal ideologies. Though some women align themselves with the dictatorship, taking on those ideologies, it seems as though there is a force opposing those views. With this opposition, it can be argued that there is this need for gender equality embedded within women, to be seen as equals, and that it is inherent to women. There is something inherent, which inhabits a woman, allowing for them to want more and to combat the oppressive patriarchy surrounding them. Inspired by this, as well as her own life, Belli writes extensively of this in *The Inhabited Woman*, using a juxtaposing narration style to emulate and encapsulate these sentiments.

Looking at the movement more specifically, women represented the sentiment of liberal feminism. Of course, while women wanted to be considered equal in every regard or aspect, they also wished for the same opportunities and rights to be extended to everyone—regardless of gender or socio-economic status. And with this, some women wanted to exceed the expectation of equality and be seen as superior to men. While this wasn't the overall goal, it still was one that was expressed at times. In a time of a feminist wave that was spreading across the Americas, this is to be expected. However, regarding the need to become equal, women used their femininity in a unique way, presenting how feminine gender stereotypes can be used as a double-edged sword. Roles within the family as well as society itself became utilized to aid the mobilization of women. Written by Norma Stoltz Chinchilla in an article titled "Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: Articulating Class, Gender, and National Sovereignty" Chinchilla writes of similar sentiments, providing insight to how gender was utilized as a double-edged sword, emphasizing how this struggle for suffrage and equality is something inherent to humanity. Chinchilla writes:

It was not based on the assumption that women's political consciousness was a derivative of men's that it, the hand-me-down consciousness concept that feminists have rightly criticized (Hartmann 1981; Rowbotham 1974; Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 1979) but on the assumption that women have gender-specific experiences, some of which are class-specific but others of which are shared across all social classes (Chinchilla 374).

It is here where Chinchilla outlines how this need for equality—or the need to exceed men in rising above gender expectations and stereotypes—is something that is inherent to all women, no matter their socioeconomic status. In this, Chinchilla outlines how machismo is a universal experience for women. And in this experience, there is this inherent strive for equality and a more equitable society. However, this inhabitant found within women is often described as something that is passed down, or a seed planted by men. For women could not derive their own political identity without the aiding help of men. In Chinchilla's assertions and overview of feminism within Nicaragua, she outlines the same sentiments asserted in Belli's *The Inhabited Woman*: the desire for equality in regards to women's suffrage is all-encompassing and inherent to women.

Shifting a bit, Belli parallels these ideas through Lavinia, an upper-class woman, who finds a job going against the stereotypes and expectations for women. Throughout the novel, it juxtaposes Lavinia's present-day experience with a past one, possibly an ancestral force, Itzá. Belli specifically writes about this inhabiting force, Itzá, and her impact on Lavinia, implying there is this ancestral and biological need to rise above oppressive, patriarchal forces. Throughout the novel, it is common for Belli to end the

chapter showcasing this juxtaposing narrative, emphasizing the desired shift and mobilization for gender roles to change. Within this segment of juxtaposing narrative structure, Belli writes of how Lavinia is becoming more independent within the movement, as well as her own life, and not as dependent on Felipe. Belli then ends the chapter in a momentous way, indicating this desire to be independent of man has always been there, something just has to occur for this desire to come to fruition. Belli writes: "I am alone and nobody can tell me for certain if what I am doing is right or wrong." This was the amazing thing about running one's own life, she thought: that chiaroscuro substance shifting in time whose individual duration was a chance like everything else." (Belli 188). It is here where Lavinia truly realizes her independence, where she is able to recognize she is her own human—regardless of gender—and able to make her own decisions. She is independent—financially and mentally—able to make her own decisions without Felipe's input or any other man. Ending this chapter, to drive it home, Belli decides to re-emphasize this through Itzá; once again utilizing her juxtaposing narration style in order to emphasize this inherent trait to rebel against machismo. With this, Belli writes: "My presence has been a knife to carve away indifference. But hidden within her were the sensations which now flourish and that some day will intone chants that will never die" (Belli 189). It is here where this idea of machismo is fully retaliated against, and the point that Belli is asserting throughout the entirety of the novel. It is through Nicaragua's revolution where these parallels are truly seen, and can be connected to. Not only is this connection present and apparent within the novel, but it is also in times of retaliation where something inherent, which inhabits us, comes to the surface, allowing for the desire of gender—equality to be seen. Belli is able to achieve this through this consistent and constant juxtaposing narrative.

BELLI'S STRUGGLE

Not only was Belli moved and inspired by the Nicaraguan revolution and the Sandinista struggle to write about it, but she was also involved in the Sandinista struggle. It is here where we can see the similarities between Belli and Lavinia, perhaps indicating *The Inhabited Woman* is a form of autobiography, including some whimsical and fictional aspects. Lavinia, mirroring Belli, comes from an upper-middle class family, is well educated, and has her own economic independence through her own job. Being somewhat autobiographical, it is important and essential to understand this connection between Belli and her character Lavinia. By beginning to comprehend this connection Belli paints, the ability to see that revolt against machismo and wanting an equality for women is something that is inherent to women and inhabits them. In her book *Américas, Autocracy, and Autobiographical Innovation: Overwriting the Dictator*, Dr. Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle provides similar sentiments in discussing Belli's background and the correlation of it to her work in the second chapter "Dueña y Señora de Su Canto" —ultimately causing her work to be enriched with autobiographical tendencies. In a personal poem written by Belli, Dr. Ortiz-Vilarelle correlates this to the Sandinista struggle, connecting Belli to her work through her relationship with her daughter and the struggle. In her analysis of the poem, Dr. Ortiz-Vilarelle writes:

...Belli wills her daughter to be "born again" in her grandchildren, a reproductive as well as revolutionary vow. Together they keep the flag "red" by a Marxist means of reproduction in which her daughter, like her mother, is physically capable of birthing and rebirthing "many times" in the name of *Sandinismo*. (Ortiz-Vilarelle 73).

Perhaps, though Belli is mirroring herself within Lavinia, it could be a representation of her relationship with her daughter. And within that relationship, Belli represents Itzá, drawing out this revolutionary attribute that lies within her daughter to join the Sandinista struggle. Where *The Inhabited Woman* is categorized in the genre of fiction, it really represents a piece of nonfiction, mirroring Nicaragua's complex history that is tainted with autocracies, as well as a feminist struggle. In this feminist struggle, Belli paints and asserts the picture of how this revolutionary-state-of-mind in desire for women's suffrage is present and is capable of "rebirthing" within women "many times." Categorizing this within the fruit, Belli is able to paint such a complex depiction of Nicaragua and the Sandinista struggle through the viewpoint of her own life, essentially arguing that women's suffrage and revolution

are connected and embedded within all women until something awakes it. And when awoken, it can be rebirthed over and over again, becoming multigenerational.

MEMOIR

While her poetry emphasizes the connection between her life and her novel *The Inhabited Woman*, her memoir simply confirms that this novel is collective of personal and national history, emphasizing this inherent, feminist warrior. In her memoir, she details a personal struggle as well as the collective struggle to break free from machismo and an autocracy. In the introduction of her memoir, she confirms this sentiment in writing:

I have been two women and I have lived two lives. One of these women wanted to do everything according to the classic feminine code: get married, be supportive, docile, and nurturing. The other woman yearned for the privileges men enjoyed: independence, self-reliance, a public life, mobility, lovers (Belli ix-x).

Though she does not mention her nation's history here, this portion only confirms that the characters, Itzá and Lavinia, mirror her life. And in mirroring her life, she splits this internal struggle into two characters, emphasizing the patriarchal systems around her and how the oppression done by machistas is a universal experience, experienced by all women. She continues writing in the same paragraph: "In the end I believe I have found a way that allows both women to live together beneath the same skin. Without renouncing my femininity, I think I have also managed to live like a man" (Belli x). It is here where she commemorates her national history, nodding to liberal feminism, confirming her national history with feminism in Nicaragua. In doing this, it is evident that in her *The Inhabited Woman*, she is depicting her own life and her nation's history with machismo and an autocracy. If this was not enough, she not only details this throughout her memoir, but it is in the last paragraph of her concluding chapters where her characters, Lavinia and Itzá, are seen through her. Belli writes: "...I realized that I would no longer be satisfied by passive and sensory pleasures, that for me nothing would compare to the vibrant passion of pursuing collective dreams" (Belli 346). It is here where it is truly evident that Belli outlines her personal struggle against machismo and autocracies, stating that there is simply nothing better than accepting the inhabiting force within oneself in order to fight against oppressive forces that deny equality.

Continuing, another article marries these sentiments nicely, engaging with Dr. Ortiz-Vilarelle's analysis further and Belli's own memoir, asserting that through a feminist and Marxist lens, Belli is able to connect Nicaragua's history, whilst discussing the relationships between characters such as Itzá and Lavinia. Titled "The Erotic Union of Marxist and Feminist Thought in Gioconda Belli's 'La mujer habitada'" and written by Alana Reid, the article discusses the relationships between Lavinia and Itzá, the erotic union behind Lavinia and Itzá, as well as Lavinia's relationships with others—all of this encompassing how the erotic union led to a happy marriage between Marxist and feminist theory. And with this marriage sprouts the overarching message Belli is telling, how this marriage is simply bound within most women, inhabiting them, until certain times arise where it comes to fruition. Though it is inherent to women, it is through other relationships and one's own status that truly articulates this creation of a sense of liberty and a desire for individualism within the breaking down of gender stereotypes. With this Reid writes:

Through her relationships with Felipe, Itzá and Flor, the revolution is eroticized for Lavinia. It is connected with bodily sensation and desire; desire to access the prohibited by engaging in the revolution, desire for intimacy with another woman, and the desire to recreate and reproduce militant power. Sexuality, in effect, disciplines Lavinia's "docile body" to create a revolutionary martyr (Foucault *Discipline*). (Reid 77).

Though this deals with the novel heavily, it still provides an interesting insight to the text, and can be connected to this complex history which I outlined previously. It is evident within this portion from Reid's article that through these relationships, whether or not it is primarily the union of Lavinia and Itzá, create this insatiable need for a change in women's suffrage in desire for some sort of liberation from an oppressive force. And though it is set within this fictitious country, Faguas, Belli provides more than enough allusions to corroborate her personal history as well as Nicaragua's. This is seen within so many literary devices and themes implemented by Belli, all in hopes to provide this message of how revolution lives within women and there is a need to fight against machismo and machistas.

Reverting back to the novel, this relationship is essential to the novel in order to emulate all of this. Belli does this so strategically, incorporating Nicaragua's history as well as her own. While at first glance it may not seem so apparent, this novel—though fictional in a lot of senses—is truly a form of autobiography, depicting details from Belli's life. Belli does this to tell her audience that there is this unspoken fight against machismo and it being found within all women, as well as men. She constantly emulates this through her juxtaposition of first person and third person narration styles between Itzá and Lavinia. Not only does she do this through this juxtaposing narrative, but she does so by weaving these themes of class, eroticism, and feminism within the novel—all-encompassing her own history as well as Nicaragua's. In the final moments of the novel, in closing remarks through Itzá's narration, Belli encompasses all of this in writing: "The light is lit. No one can extinguish it. No one will ever extinguish the sound of beating drums" (Belli 411). In these final remarks by Itzá, Belli writes in prose, depicting a scene in which all of the characters who have been killed throughout the story live on, providing for the next generation in some way. The men have become songbirds; and the women have become stationary or the foundation, comparing Lavinia to the earth (Belli 411). In doing so in such a poetic sense, it emulates all that Belli aims to achieve within this novel: discussing how foundational women are to a movement and how everyone is essential to fighting against machismo. And in placing women as a foundation, it plants how women are essential to mobilization and to every revolution, ultimately asserting they are the foundation of the larger fight against oppression. Within these shifting narratives and narrations, Belli asserts that the desire for equality is embedded within revolutions—ultimately arguing that the challenge of gender roles is inherent to revolutions and women.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Latin America's history, there has been a long and complicated history with autocracies and how they have limited people's freedoms. It is in these struggling and difficult times where revolutions are mobilized and the discourse for freedom begins. It is within these times where the inherent trait to fight for suffrage and a shift in stereotypical gender roles is seen, mainly through women. The notion of machismo is fought against and broken down in order to attempt to achieve an equitable and equal society. While there are many autocracies that have represented this, these sentiments are truly apparent and evident within Nicaragua and are expressed through Gioconda Belli's novel *The Inhabited Woman*. In a long and moving narrative, Belli is able to assert these sentiments through the juxtaposing narrative—ultimately asserting that the fight against machismo and machistas is inherent and inhabits women. Belli, not only uses a juxtaposing narration to achieve the emphasis of these sentiments, but also incorporates trickles of her own life to achieve this, giving her novel not only a whimsical nature to it but also an autobiographical one. Within these shifting narratives and narrations, Belli asserts that the desire for equality is embedded within revolutions—ultimately arguing that the challenge of gender roles is inherent to revolutions and women.

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