

No Easy Way Out (The Role of Women in Pedro Paramo) by Amy Mulvin
<https://amymulvin.wordpress.com/tag/pedro-paramo/>

Feminist criticism looks at the ways literature continues to corroborate the oppression of women, and in his story, *Pedro Paramo*, author Juan Rulfo exposes women's oppression in great depth and shows some of the not-so-ideal endings to having dealt with this oppression. If it is true, as has been suggested, that Rulfo considers Susana San Juan the main character of this story, then it seems evident that his intent in the portrayal of feminist oppression is not to condone the behavior and offer a catalyst of reinforcement of its continuation, but instead to depict the varying ways female oppression is present and the limited ways it is escaped from.

The initial portrayal of women in *Pedro Paramo* is that of helplessness and dependency upon the wealth and power of men. Rulfo first weaves into the story of *Pedro Paramo* the many ways, both subtle and evident, in which female oppression is present. From the very opening of the story the reader is introduced to the last wishes of a single mother, poor and deprived, for her son to collect what is owed to him from his absent father (p.2625). The reader gets the sense that the mother is resentful of having lived such a fate (p.2647), and later the reader is exposed to the reality of the burden a single mother is on her family members without the support of a man (p.2634). The portrayal of women as helpless and burdensome is particularly oppressive as it shames the woman into limiting her self-worth and her independence. For many women the fear enables the power of men to maintain the oppression of women.

Fear presents an oppression of its own insidious value as it continually destabilizes a woman's strength. Destabilization of feminine strength is key, of course, to the perception of worthlessness, thus allowing male dominance to continue its ravenous reign. In *Pedro Paramo*, the portrayal of Pedro's expectation of Dolorita to cook and serve his needs, and yet she is never good enough in her endeavors (p.2634) reiterates this self-image of worthlessness. Prior to the expectation of Dolorita to fulfill the domestic role in Pedro's house, her fear of not being worthy of a man such as Pedro is implied in her worry over the temporary inability to please her husband on their wedding night (p.2633). Rulfo's portrayal of the woman as required to satisfy her husband's needs in every way, including sexually, is an ancient expectation along with the representation of women as purposeless except for the fulfillment of a man's needs. In the book *The Shattered Mirror: Representations of Women in Mexican Literature*, author Maria Elena de Valdes states that, although it is a common expectation of women all over the world, particularly "in Mexico, women have not just been cast in the role of sex object...; rather they have been taught that their purpose in life is to serve and obey their father and then their husband" (Valdes p.16).

To many women, and under many unfortunate circumstances, these sexual fulfillments end in the reproduction and bearing of children. What is potentially a great blessing can very quickly become heartache and burden on a woman who, after having been used

for the man's dominant release, has been denied not only provision from a responsible man for the life he half created, but also denied the acceptance and opportunity to make her own comfortable place in society.

On the flipside of this bittersweet scenario, is the oppression of society on the woman who cannot bear children. Valdes' supports this with her statement that "The Mexican woman does not consider herself – nor do others consider her – to be a woman who has reached fulfillment if she has not produced children, if the halo of maternity does not shine above her (Valdes p.16). Rulfo shows his readers the incarnation of this in Dorotea who shares with Juan her regrets of never having borne a child and dream that it was because she had been given "a mother's heart but the womb of a whore" (p.2657). The implication of that statement is that a woman who is unable to reproduce is inadequate and therefore unworthy of any greater respect than that of a common street whore, which, in itself, carries the stigma of immeasurable oppressive allusions and issues of degraded self worth.

The issue of degraded self worth is no more evident than in the introduction of Donis and his sister. While Valdes claims that Juan Rulfo indirectly opposed sexism "through irony and the use of the autonomous fictional character" (Valdes p.52), Rulfo made Donis and his sister the culmination of direct, and should-be-obvious, degradation at the cross-center of the story of Pedro Paramo. Donis and his sister, who have been engaged in an incestuous relationship, appear to bear the shame of such very differently from one another. Sharon Magnarelli, in her article "Women, Violence and Sacrifice in Pedro Paramo and la muerte de Artemio Cruz", states that, "...in Pedro Paramo, Donis' sister (who apparently has no name) is blamed for their incestuous relationship and censured by all. It is she who is marked by sin, she whom the bishop admonishes, she who dissolves into mud before Juan's eyes. It would appear, if we are to judge by the reactions of the other characters, that Donis, her partner in this transgression, is somehow less reprehensible" (Magnarelli). Interesting also that, in the end, it is the sister who continues to live in the guilt of it all from her realm of the dead while her brother, Donis, comes and goes presently independent of it in the world of the living (p.2654).

The incestuous affair of Donis with his sister is not the only forced incest upon a woman in Pedro Paramo, nor is it the only visibly direct oppression of the women of Comala. Aside from the incest of Donis' sister, there are implications of an incestuous relationship between Susana San Juan and her father, Bartolome. Fulgor Sedano's statement to Pedro regarding Susana's return to Comala that, "...the way he treats her, she seems more like his wife" (p.2669), though it is not as direct in its reference as is the incest of Donis and his sister, it is implied. The implication then explains Susana's insistence on referring to her father by his first name, and offers a glimpse into the edge of her madness (2670). In their article, "Psychotherapy with Vietnam Veterans and Rape and Incest Survivors," authors Ellen Dye and Susan Roth compare the posttraumatic stress disorder of rape and incest survivors with that of Vietnam veterans

who “came home to a hostile America in which they felt cut off, distant from, and misunderstood by other Americans.” Similarly, Dye and Roth go on to compare, “rape and incest survivors commonly report feeling similarly alienated. Because of negative perceptions of the Vietnam War and of the pervasive existence of myths about women who become survivors of sexual trauma, both veterans and sexual trauma survivors commonly experience a lack of both social and institutional support” (Dye). The psychological claim by Dye and Roth not only offers insight into the oppression of Susana, but also supports the double standard related to the affair of Donis and his sister.

Aside from the direct oppression of incestuous actions, blatant sexual oppression of women is evident in the innumerable potential rapes committed by Pedro’s son, Miguel. Miguel’s alleged rape of Ana exemplifies the same oppression regarding rape that is active in today’s society as well. Father Rentaria’s continual probing of Ana’s recollection of the presumably traumatic experience causes not only the reader to begin to question Ana’s credibility, but also serves to degrade and humiliate Ana, the victim of sexual assault (p. 2638). Father Rentaria’s question to Ana, “So what did you do to make him leave?” and her response of, “I didn’t do anything” (p.2639), so classically exemplifies the unfounded, yet common misconception, that women who are raped do not try hard enough to stop it. The whole text around the above conversation is obviously Rulfo’s attempt at making a mockery of the ridiculousness and insensitivity that female victims of trauma typically have to endure.

It is interesting that Rulfo chose the character of a woman to be that which would be the accomplice to man’s forceful and determined oppression of women. Dorotea’s confession of having assisted Miguel by providing him access or information to the women he preyed upon is disheartening (p.2665), however, it is an eye-opening inclusion and rather clever on Rulfo’s part. Rulfo seems to use sisterhood as a means of condoning and promoting patriarchy by appeasing the powers that be. The sisterhood of women fail to support and uplift one another in the examples of both, Dorotea collecting women for Miguel, and Dolorita’s persuasion of Ediveges in plotting so that Pedro can potentially be satisfied on his wedding night even in spite of nature’s cycle which Dolorita has no control over in the first place (p.2633). Instead, of banding together to firmly stand against such degrading treatment and oppressive culture, the sisterhood selfishly sacrifice each other for a single moment of protection and/or providence by a man.

Unfortunately, Rulfo provides only three escapes from female oppression in the village of Comala: exile, death, or madness. The option of exile, as chosen by Dolorita, carries with it many sacrifices, as well as the inevitable extra burden on family members. It seems, however, that, in leaving and losing, the peace comes at least in death. Dolorita appears to be the most calm and collected of all the haunting voices in the story. For those who die, whether naturally or by their own hands, while still under the suffocation of oppression, the oppression follows them to the grave. Dolorita’s statement, “. . .that is,

if death ever had a voice” (p.2628) seems to say that even in death there may be no escape; no voice to speak out and change something. Even in death, the oppression of women consumes.

=====

Works Cited

Magnarelli, Sharon. “Women, Violence and Sacrifice in *Pedro Paramo* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*.” *Inti: Revista de literature hispanica* (1981): 13-7. Web. 4

May. 2012.

Rulfo, Juan. “Pedro Paramo.” *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Vol. F. Ed.

Sarah Lawall and Maynard Mack. New York: Norton, 2002. 2625-2692. Print.

Valdes, Maria Elena de. *The Shattered Mirror: Representations of Women in Mexican*

Literature. Austin, TX: the University of Texas Press, 1998. Print.