

## Subverting Social Norms in Gioconda Belli's *La mujer habitada*

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The official hegemonic ideology within Faguas, Gioconda Belli's imagined nation, is one in which the military government dictates the political environment whereas the aristocratic class governs the norms for social behavior.<sup>1</sup> However, the reader realizes that although this dominant ideology is accepted by most citizens of Faguas, it is merely a façade; the accepted rules of political and social behavior are constantly being contested by the protagonist Lavinia, revealing that in fact these norms are re-negotiated in the personal (private) and public realms at all times. In this article I will address how Belli succeeds in questioning the ability of the State to produce Official History through her portrayal of Lavinia, who contests the government as well as the recognized norms of her class and gender. Customarily, Lavinia would not be important historically simply because of the fact that she is a woman. However, this exclusionary tactic is proven false when Gioconda Belli examines the inaccurate perception of women and their roles in shaping historical events in her "unofficially historical" novel, *La mujer habitada* (1988).

Lavinia as a child, and as a young adult, has been sheltered all her life as a member of the aristocratic class which maintains considerable advantages over the abusive government that does not question their social superiority. Faguas has two identities; it is a country run by blood thirsty tyrants, yet at the same time it is a nation in flux because many of its members have decided that they are unwilling to accept such oppressive leadership. Ernest Renan's definition of what constitutes a nation may shed light on why many inhabitants of Faguas refuse to support a military government. Renan writes: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received" (19). It is this "present-day consent, the desire to live together" that the majority of Faguans do not share.

Lavinia is unaffected by the oppressive realities of her own government at the outset of the novel, nevertheless she goes through a process of self-growth at the same time that her nation is being redefined by a subversive group called the Movement. Lavinia's exterior identity is a result of privilege; coming from wealth she was allowed to study architecture in Europe and even though a woman, her parents permitted her to study abroad because at that time it was quite popular with "la gente de linaje" (15). Upon her return to Faguas, Lavinia's mother, as the embodiment of the norms of the highest social strata, attempted to control her daughter's entrance onto the social scene by purchasing lavish new outfits for her. As Lavinia's parent, it was her job to ensure that the norms were strictly followed because if they were not, this would have reflected poorly onto her own social status. When Lavinia tells her parents that she is moving out of their home, the reader realizes how much her mother and father fear a negative backlash when s/he reads: "Las caras de su padre y su madre pronosticándole la deshonra, el chisme, la maledicencia" and further on "Lo 'mavistas' que eran las mujeres solas" (59). As an adult, Lavinia has realized that she does not enjoy the company of fellow class members or that of her own parents who attempt to enforce her attendance at social engagements required of their social stature. Instead of marrying and having children, which is conventional for women of her class, Lavinia rejects this way of life, lives alone, and begins her professional career as an architect, constructing rather than inhabiting the interior spaces that have managed to enclose her gender and class for centuries.

Just as Lavinia relocates into a home of her own, she comes into contact with people of different classes, genders and political beliefs which make her aware of possible changes that could alter her identity as an individual and as a member of her nation. As a result, she begins to question the validity of her birth privileges. Within this arena which consists of people from varied ideologies (termed a contact zone by Mary Louise Pratt), Lavinia continues to negotiate her identity in order to contest the accepted norms of her class and gender. In Pratt's article "Criticism in the Contact Zone: Decentering Community and Nation," she states that this shared time and space focuses on "how social bonds operate across lines of difference, hierarchy, and unshared or conflicting assumptions" (88).

Lavinia begins to develop a social conscience as a result of the several contact zones that she shares with her parents, her best friend Sara, and her lover Felipe. She realizes that not only is she going to reject the norms of her class and gender that Sara's life as "ama de casa" and as mother satisfy, but that she would also like to be treated as an equal in her relationship with Felipe. The initiation to this atypical life began when she had to look beyond her own parents for love and support; her aunt Inés

and her grandfather influenced her to dream and to become an architect. It was both these relatives who helped Lavinia to understand that she amounted to more than a series of acceptable or inappropriate behaviors, and that she was quite worthy of exercising her own will. Lavinia is not the typical female (like Sara) since she abandons her father's house without getting married. In rejecting Sara's way of life the omniscient narrator states: "No le habría gustado ser como Sara, su mejor amiga; tener rasgos de porcelana" (14). Also after Lavinia's first day at work in a male dominated world she thinks to herself: "Sara no entendería que ella se sintiera tan contenta. Ella no entendía el placer de ser uno mismo, de tomar decisiones, tener la vida bajo control" (27-28). It is interesting to note that not only does Belli create a headstrong female character but she also characterizes her as completely lacking in what are considered typically feminine abilities. For example, Lavinia is quite untidy and needs the help of a maid to put order into her daily life as well as to prepare her meals: "El desorden era evidente hoy, pasado el fin de semana sin Lucrecia, la doméstica, la única que ordenaba porque ella estaba acostumbrada a la vida acomodada y fácil" (15,16). In the kitchen, "Lavinia se contentaba con emparedados, queso, jamón, salami, cacahuetes, porque no sabía cocinar" (16).

Cooking and cleaning are far from Lavinia's daily activities; remarkably she lives the sort of life that women have been denied by Official History. Although she works outside the home as an architect, her male coworker, Felipe, continues to remind Lavinia of her origins in instances when she is convinced that her client has made a tasteless choice in deciding the design of his/her residence: "Felipe le ayudaba a llegar a compromisos [. . .] Sólo de vez en cuando le reclamaba casi a gritos su voluntarismo de 'niña mimada', repitiéndole que ella estaba ganando un salario para complacer a los clientes [. . .] (41). Lavinia's class has allowed her entrance into a world that heretofore women were denied access, yet in this environment she continues to be perceived by men as a spoiled little girl.

The opportunity to live and work outside the accepted norms of her class and gender give Lavinia an impetus to develop her own identity in a critical time in the history of her country. In Belli's novel the protagonist only becomes aware of her prestigious position as an aristocrat and as an architect when she learns of the freedom fighters and the oppression of the lower classes. Prior to Lavinia's exposure to revolutionary ideologies her world was quite narrow, consisting only of her own desires to refute what was expected of her: "Una cosa era su rebelión personal contra el status quo, demandar independencia, irse de su casa, sostener una profesión, y otra [era] exponerse a esta aventura descabellada" (82). Lavinia slowly be-

gins to participate as an active (and no longer passive) woman at the same juncture in her personal life, and in the life of her country.

Lavinia's contact with a poor man living in a shantytown aids her social conscience raising. This man says to her: "En este país nadie sabe lo que no le conviene" (34) in reference to the development contractors choosing another place than his home for a new shopping mall. It is noteworthy that when Sebastián, a leader of the Revolutionary Movement is injured and Felipe brings him to Lavinia's home for help her first response is to act with fear. She does not want to know anything about what is happening. "Ella no podía reaccionar. Le hubiera gustado poder salir corriendo. La idea de la guardia siguiéndoles los pasos la aterrorizaba. De sobra sabía los métodos que empleaban; la tortura, el volcán [. . .] Y ella, mujer. Se imaginó violada en las mazmorras del Gran General" (72). Lavinia falls into the category of not wanting to know anything that could put her in jeopardy, that same category that the man in the shantytown mentioned. She can only see one side to the rebellion; the side of personal suffering that could result if she is caught helping people who are known revolutionaries. At this stage in her personal development, Lavinia is incapable of thinking beyond her individual needs, which in this case are those of safety. Her uneasiness in this situation is reflected in this statement that shows her need for self-preservation: "Pienso que están equivocados, que es un suicidio heroico. Te pido, por favor, que no me volvá a meter en nada de esto [. . .]". And further on: "No tengo madera para esas cosas" (83).

Following Lavinia's original fearful rejection of the Movement, she initiates an exploration into her own identity in relation to Faguan society and its hierarchical class structure. Lavinia's understanding of her surroundings begins to change in spite of the fact that all of her friends and family continue to exist as they always have, never questioning their good fortune during a time when many people are persecuted by the government. Subsequent to reading pamphlets that explain the Movement's goals, Lavinia reverts to the fervent question that the luxury of her class allows: is change possible? She thinks: "[A]sí habían sido las cosas desde siempre [. . .] ¿Quién se atrevía a soñar en cambiar todo aquello? ¿Por qué pensar que estos deseos trabajosamente escritos podrían cambiar el estado—'natural', diría Sara—de las cosas?" (142). Lavinia seems resigned to accept for her nation what she would not accept for herself: the norm, the 'natural' state of things. And she is not alone because most Faguans simply concur with what their unjust society dictates. This resigned attitude is apparent in the underprivileged inhabitants of the shantytown who believe there is nothing they can do to avoid losing their homes. Another case in point is Sara, who admittedly realizes that her role as homemaker

and child bearer distances her from her husband, yet she remains compliant to the extent that her behavior reinforces the status quo. Also, Lucrecia, Lavinia's maid, agrees to her place in society by being complacent in her role as an insignificant member of Faguas. Evidently, Lucrecia as a female member of the lower class is the most submissive citizen of all. In response to Lavinia's question: "¿No crees que en la vida, y no en el cielo únicamente, todas las personas deberían tener la oportunidad de vivir mejor?" Lucrecia replies: "[L]a cosa es que ya el mundo es como es y a uno no le queda más camino que resignarse, pensar que la va a pasar mejor en el cielo [. . .]" (227). At this moment in the novel, Lavinia has modified her own attitude by coming to the realization that she can no longer be an accomplice to injustice by simply existing apathetically. As a result of her studies concerning the Movement in connection to a newly acquired awareness of the realities of her own country, Lavinia decides that she has a purpose in life and it is not to surrender to a world where injustice surrounds her everyday and at every moment.

Lavinia, acting independently from Felipe, her revolutionary lover, and fellow architect in the same firm, slowly becomes actively involved against Faguas' abusive government. As a member of the Movement, she no longer takes her position in society for granted, she realizes that she is able to work towards a better society for others by putting her own skills (as an architect) at the service of the rebellion. Lavinia also learns the importance not only of how she sees her own self, but also how her lover Felipe perceives her. First, out of anger at his haughty approach towards her, she shields him from the knowledge of her development, later she shares the truth that she has joined the Movement. Felipe as a man, and 'compañero' of the Movement is actually satisfied with Lavinia's first response to learning of his subversive activities. In order to calm her fears, he tells her that she must keep him grounded. However, as she becomes more and more independent, she confesses to Flor, another 'compañera', that "no quiero ser solamente la ribera de su río" (135). She wants to be more than a woman on the sidelines and Felipe in turn, must learn to accept her, as his lover, and as a fellow member of the rebellion.

After Lavinia made her decision to join the Movement with Flor's help, and not Felipe's, she decides, with vengeance, that "no le diría nada [a Felipe], [. . .] lo condenaría—como hacía él—al margen de la página; a estar ausente él también de uno de los nudos de la vida de ella; a la ignorancia inocente, tan común en la historia del género femenino" (138). As Lavinia cautiously develops into an independent, politically active woman, Felipe needs time to come to terms with the unusual fact that Lavinia has decided to actively participate in the perilous life of the Movement. Felipe continues to view Lavinia as a "niña rica que cree que puede hacer cualquier

cosa" while she reveals her perspective on the matter: "nunca pensarías que estoy madura para el Movimiento. No te conviene. Querés conservar tu nicho de 'normalidad' [. . .] tu mujercita colaborando bajo tu dirección sin desarrollarse por sí misma" (186). Earlier in the novel, Lavinia would have been such a 'normal' woman, but at this stage she points out that perhaps Felipe is suffering from a masculine superiority complex as she discloses his now dated hope that she remain a traditional woman.

Despite Lavinia's personal growth, due to her privileged background and access to military secrets (she is designing the general's new house), she is not immediately exposed to the physical dangers of belonging to the Movement. Ironically, it is not until Felipe's death that Lavinia is allowed to enter into the world of combat, and only upon his repeated insistence that she take his place in the insurrection planned for the following day. It is as if Lavinia should have his blessing after having proved herself willing and capable to fight in battle for the Movement's imagined nation. This contact zone between Felipe and Lavinia and the consequences resulting from it, manifest Bellí's utopian vision of a future where power is balanced equally on the shoulders of both genders and all classes.

The realm of combat, however, has been inhabited by other women in Bellí's novel, specifically Itzá, an indigenous woman who lived at the time of the Conquest. She was eventually killed as she and her lover fought an armed battle to defend themselves from becoming slaves to the Spaniards. In the narrative present, Itzá has been reborn in Nature as an orange tree in Lavinia's backyard. Itzá, represents the indigenous past. She inhabits Lavinia; each time Lavinia drinks the orange juice made from the tree in her yard, she becomes more and more conscious of her role in society. Itzá has had a major influence on Lavinia's development as is evident in this quote:

Poco queda ya de aquella mujer dormida que el aroma de mis azahares despertó del sueño pesado del ocio. Lentamente, Lavinia ha ido tocando fondo en sí misma, alcanzando el lugar donde dormían los sentimientos nobles que los dioses dan a los hombres antes de mandarlos a morar a la tierra y sembrar el maíz. Mi presencia ha sido cuchillo para cortar la indiferencia. Pero dentro de ella existían ocultas las sensaciones que ahora afloran y que un día entonarían cantos que no morirán (209-10).

Lavinia is intuitively taught by Itzá, who with most of the Indian past, has been relegated by Official History to the realm of myth and legend.

Itzá, through the subconscious, raises the political awareness and com-



mitment of Lavinia as well as providing her with the strength to fulfill her destiny. Timothy Richards in his "Resistance and Liberation: The Mythic Voice and Textual Authority" delineates myth, the female voice and subversion as integral parts to Belli's novel and to resistance literature in general. He states: "[. . .] through association with the mythic voice, in the uniting of female generations, the contemporary female hero gathers strength which she then reinvests in the popular resistance movement" (213). In the following quote, Richards explains why subversion, which is the method employed by both Lavinia (personally) and the rebellion (collectively), is such an important component to Belli's novel; he proclaims that subversion:

[E]xplains and justifies the ideology of resistance, its historical commitment and even its necessity. It imposes a structure on the narrative that both reflects the inner tensions of the present and points to the resolution in the future. It suggests that as the contemporary protagonist becomes committed to social activism, she organizes her life according to 'different' norms and, in death, she will remain a productive part of the collective within Nature (213).

Lavinia, at the end of the novel, will take her place alongside Itzá in the continuum of struggles for freedom when she makes the utmost sacrifice by dying for the Movement and for her country's future. However, her death is not a sign of defeat. In terms of indigenous beliefs of time and space, she simply changes form to become a new living creature; she will be reborn from the earth with a fresh beginning. This representation of hope as a new era in death is part of Belli's utopian vision for the future of her country. The use of myth is important because it reveals the unofficial role that women have had in history while also revealing facets of the ideologies prescribed to by both indigenous and dominant cultures.

Lavinia then, represents a combination of cultures; as a mestizo she is a mixture of both Spanish and Nahual ancestry. Yet her search for identity is not based upon ethnicity so much as on class and gender issues. When Lavinia accepts to take Felipe's place, she comes full circle in her political (public) and private (individual) development. She has left behind her personal concerns of refusing to adhere to the norms, and has moved into the realm where she as an individual can make a difference for the collective as an active member of the Movement. She steps out onto center stage as Lavinia, but also as Inés (her code name) and as number 12 (her Eureka mission name), but it is her death that gives success to the insurrection, and defeat to General Vela. The negotiations that allowed her to

reach this place as an individual mirror the development of her Nation that came together to battle for freedoms and human rights for all citizens. Lavinia, Inés, number 12, and Gioconda Belli have taken the reader to a place where freedom is the norm, where social class or gender do not provide privilege or advantage. Collectively as women, as resistance fighters, Itzá, Lavinia and Gioconda Belli provide us with a glimpse of the future, although imaginary, it is just as important as any official historical negotiation of nationhood. The syncretization of past and present, male and female, indigenous and mestizo, and finally history and literature reveals how pliable and negotiable an individual's identity can be, and in turn how nations must include real imaginings that never deny citizenship to any member of that nation. In the words of Homi Bhabha, "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase idealizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological maneuvers through which imagined communities are given essentialist identities" (300). It is possible to interpret Belli's novel as an attempt to modify what a nation is; unmistakably, it is similar to individual identity because of the parallel made to Lavinia's personal life. Therefore nationhood, (like an individual's identity), is a fluid construct which is constantly being renegotiated at all times. In *La mujer habitada*, the military dictatorship unsuccessfully attempted to establish a nation that had a very select membership. Belli contests this official nation building because of its exclusive nature by questioning its legitimacy and by imagining a new paradigm: that of inclusion. In Belli's new nation, women are accepted and given a place in History. Her novel has successfully renegotiated and re-imagined the past in order to create and imagine a future based on new ideological beliefs of equality between genders and the dissolution of old ones. Gioconda Belli contests Official History by including the roles of the temporary as well as past women combatants who consciously decided to be politically active; Lavinia is placed within a historical continuum of women who, although relegated to legend and myth, were just as real. The vital to the struggles of the past as they are to the struggles of today without a doubt will no longer be simply mythical in the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term nation is used in the sense that Benedict Anderson gave it in *Imagined Communities* where "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" which "makes it possible [. . .] for so many millions of people, never much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7).

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## Tradición religiosa y cultura de la violencia en *Noticia de un secuestro* y *La Virgen de los sicarios*

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Antes de formular la tesis del presente estudio es necesario establecer un marco teórico sobre los diversos conceptos de cultura, así como la definición de la religión católica en la cultura latinoamericana. El concepto de cultura no tiene un consenso general. Según Richard E. Cote, quien propone diversos conceptos diacrónicos sobre lo que es cultura, una de las definiciones que no presenta los "elitismos eurocentristas" de los siglos dieciocho y diecinueve<sup>1</sup> es el de E.B. Tylor y Malinowski, gracias a la aparición de la disciplina de la antropología a finales del siglo diecinueve (88). Según la definición de Tylor, citado a su vez por Cote,

Cultura o civilización tomada en su sentido etnográfico amplio, es ese todo complejo que incluye el conocimiento, las creencias, las artes, la moral, las leyes, las costumbres y cualquiera otra capacidad y hábito adquirido por el hombre como miembro de la sociedad. Hasta donde se permite la investigación de los principios generales, la condición de las diversas sociedades de la humanidad, es un sujeto apto para el estudio de las leyes del pensamiento y acción humanos (90).<sup>2</sup>

Las discrepancias en torno a la definición de cultura, y aún más la aplicabilidad homogénea de tales conceptos a todos los miembros de la sociedad dada, se desplazan a los conceptos de "dualidad de la cultura" "estructura e interacción" en oposición al mito de "integración cultural". Los comportamientos entre los miembros de una cultura. Tal oposición a la existencia de la integración o unanimidad en las culturas la expresan los sociólogos británicos Margaret S. Archer y Anthony Giddens. Archer, por ejemplo, expresa que cada cultura tiene discrepancias inherentes e inconsistencias en sí misma, además de la volatilidad impredecible del comportamiento humano (53). Para Archer, la dimensión estructural de la cultura consiste en los factores sistemáticos o constantes que definen cor