

DEARTH AND DUALITY: BORGES' FEMALE FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

When studying Borges' fiction, the reader is immediately struck by the dearth of female characters or love interest. Borges, who has often been questioned about this aspect of his work confided to Gloria Alcorta years ago: "alors si je n'écris pas sur ses sujets, c'est simplement par pudeur ... sans doute ai-je-été trop occupé par l'amour dans ma vie privée pour en parler dans mes livres."¹ At the age of eighty, when questioned by Coffa, Borges said: "If I have created any character, I don't think so, I am always writing about myself ... It is always the same old Borges, only slightly disguised."²

Many critics have decried lack of female characters and character development. Alicia Jurado likens Borges to a stage director who uses women as one would furniture or sets, in order to create environment. She says: "son borrosos o casuales o lo mínimo indiferenciadas y pasivas."³ E.D. Carter calls Borges' women little more than abstractions or symbolic interpretations.⁴ Picknhayn says that Borges' women "aparecen distorsionadas ... hasta el punto de transformar cada mujer en una cosa amorfa y carente de personalidad."⁵ and Lloyd King feels that the women of Borges' stories "always at best seem instrumental."⁶ All of the above can be said of most of his male characters because none of Borges' characters can be classified in the traditional sense. A Vilari or Hladik is no more real than a Beatriz or Ulrica. Juan Otálora is no more real than la Pelirroja and Red Scharlach is no more real than Emma Zunz. Instead of characters of flesh and blood, Borges offers intellectualized depersonalized figures and his lack of interest in psychology makes his characters two-dimensional. Ronald Christ states: "the point of origin of Borges' fiction is neither character nor plot but instead a proposition, an idea, a metaphor which because of its ingenious fantastic quality is perhaps best called a conceit."⁷ If we agree that Borges characters are "conceits" they are ipso facto mental attitudes or images. Borges creates a kind of dehumanization where sex is overshadowed by the historical or philosophical trajectory of cosmic themes and is therefore relegated to a minor position. If this is the case, does it really matter whether Borges has a preponderance of male characters?

¹ Gloria Alcorta, "Entretiens avec Gloria Alcorta" in *l'Herne* (Biennial French magazine), Paris, 1964. p. 404.

² William Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 141.

³ Alicia Jurado, *Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1964), p. 103.

⁴ E.D. Carter, Jr. "Women in the Short Stories of Borges," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 14 p. 4.

⁵ Jorge Oscar Picknhayn, *Borges a través de sus libros* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1979), p. 167.

⁶ Lloyd King, "Antagonism, Irony and Death in Two Stories by Jorge Luis Borges," *College Language Association Journal*, 23 p. 399.

⁷ Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges Art of Allusion* (New York: University Press, 1969), p. 15.

In most of Borges' plots as well as characters be they male or female, we find a double vision or duality reaching its apex in *Borges y yo* and *El otro*. Alazraki comments: "Lo que persiste es la tendencia a describir el objeto desde dos ángulos."⁸ This is not only true of the "object" but also of the "subject" and therefore creates duality of the character himself/herself.

We can divide Borges fictional women into three categories:

1. Female characters in the gaucho environment who are merely instruments or chattel; Borges calls these women "subalternas" and says: "en un ambiente bárbaro como ése tenían que ser subalternas."⁹ Examples of this type of woman are la Lujanera in *Hombre de la esquina rosada* (1933) and its complementary *Historia de Rosendo Juárez* (1946); the woman known only as la Pelirroja in *El muerto* (1946); and Juliana in *La Intrusa* (1966). Exceptions to this type of woman within a similar setting are the wife of Pedro Salvadores (1969) in the story by the same name and the la Cautiva in the story titled *Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva* (1949).

2. Female spoiled narcissistic characters of the middle class personified by Beatriz in *El Aleph* (1945) and Teodolina sometimes known as Clementina in *El Zahir* (1969).

3. Female character protagonists who serve a less instrumental role; women who, with the exception of María Justina Rubio, are as self-sufficient, independent, and concrete as any male character created by Borges. Examples of this type of woman are aunt Florentina of *Juan Maraña* (1970); Emma Zunz of the story of the same name (1949); Clara Glencairn and Marta Pizzara of *El duelo* (1970); and Ulrica of the story of the same name (1975).

Female characters in the gaucho environment

La Lujanera in *Hombre de la esquina rosada* seems a very uncomplicated figure at first glance. Alicia Jurado considers la Pelirroja and la Lujanera alike and calls them "mujeres que se entregan al macho que vence en la pelea o da pruebas de coraje."¹⁰ La Lujanera is not quite as one-dimensional as she first appears. She comes from a society that prizes violence, where sex is freely bestowed, but this does not preclude her from having human emotions. Her actions are open to various interpretations. When Francisco Real is about to fight or at least wound Rosario (her lover) she throws her arms around Francisco Real: "se le prendió y le echó los brazos al cuello y lo miró con esos ojos."¹¹ (I 294) Is this a show of admiration for the "strong" man or merely a way of saving Rosendo? Later after the Butcher's

⁸ Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Gredos 1971), p. 234.

⁹ Antonio Carrizo, *Borges el memorioso* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), p. 275.

¹⁰ Jurado, p. 103.

¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Prosa completa*, 4 vols. (Barcelona: Editorial Bruguera S.A., 1985) All direct quotes will henceforth be listed by volume and page of the above.

death, we hear her crying, a gesture making her more human. Is she crying because she is afraid for Rosendo? She swears she does not know who the murderer was but it was NOT Rosendo. Obviously she is afraid that Rosendo will be accused. When she herself is accused the narrator (who is the actual killer) saves her. Subsequently she sleeps with him. Again we do not know if she admires his courage for killing the Butcher or if she is only grateful for saving her from the accusations. In *Historia de Rosendo Juárez* written over thirty years later the narrator, ambivalent between feelings of admiration and disappointment kills his tainted hero's rival just as la Lujanera, ambivalent between admiration and disappointment had previously slept with her lover's rival.

La Pelirroja is the female character in *El Muerto*, one of many stories of rivalry. Otálora saves the life of the chieftain Bandeira and is later asked to join his band of men. La Pelirroja is Bandeira's mistress. We see her twice at his side as Otálora joins them. In the first instance he has been commanded to appear by Bandeira who "está esperándolo con una clara y desdeñosa mujer de pelo colorado" (II p. 256). The second time Bandeira is ill and Otálora has already decided to usurp his power; la Pelirroja enters "a medio vestir y descalza" (II 256) and while the two men are talking, Bandeira fingers her hair; "sus dedos juegan con las trenzas de la mujer" (II 258). To defy Bandeira Otálora must possess not only his horse but also his rival's woman; "la mujer, el apero y el colorado son atributos o adjetivos de un hombre que él aspira a destruir" (II 258). La Pelirroja becomes his mistress not out of choice but because she must fulfill her destiny. The woman is forced to kiss her "lover" just before he is shot and "arrasada en lágrimas le besa la cara y el pecho." (II 259). Is she crying in pity for the fate which awaits Otálora or is she crying in fear for herself? This episode is reminiscent of *El Evangelio de San Marcos*. In both cases the women offer themselves to men destined for destruction and in both cases they have an intuition regarding the man's destiny.

Borges' grandmother first told him the story of the captive woman (*Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva*). It must have appealed to him immediately because the personal identity aspect is a typical Borgesian theme. Borges begins with the story of Droctulft, the Lombard warrior who is so impressed by civilization that he decides to leave his people, finally defending his former enemies, an episode reminiscent of Tadeo Cruz who in a moment of self-recognition decides to fight on the side of Martin Fierro. Subsequently Borges relates the story of the young captive Englishwoman who has lived among Indians for fifteen years. As Borges' grandmother first saw her "vestía dos mantas coloradas e iba descalza; sus crenchas eran rubias" (II 271). She refuses the offer to return to civilization. Many years later when the two women meet for the last time the Englishwoman's metamorphosis is epitomized by the gesture of drinking the hot blood of a recently slaughtered sheep. Since Borges, influenced by Schopenhauer's idea regarding the illusion of individuality, reiterates that "a man is all men," this story illustrates that "a woman is all women." Here the sex of the character is of little consequence. The moment

in which she drinks the blood is "el momento en que el hombre (la mujer) sabe para siempre quién es" (II 275). Woman is no longer a sexual object, but an identity shaped by destiny; "el anverso y el reverso de esta moneda son para Dios iguales" (II 272).

La intrusa is a realistic tale, set in a gaucho environment, stripped of the usual Borgesian elements of imagery. A story of rivalry, it depicts two brothers living peacefully together until the elder, Cristián, brings home the woman Juliana. The younger brother, Eduardo falls in love with her and the brothers try to deal with their overwhelming feelings of lust, jealousy and their "shameful" affection for this woman. Borges' gauchos exhibit a sense of humiliation when it comes to love for woman; "un hombre que piensa cinco minutos seguidos en una mujer no es un hombre sino una marica" and "un hombre no decía, ni se decía que una mujer pudiera importarle, más allá del deseo y la posesión" (IV 17). At first the brothers share Juliana and later they sell her to a brothel. Unable to stay away from her they bring her back to their home. Finally Cristián kills her and they dispose of her body as they dispose of their animosity. Critics have sometimes mistakenly identified this story as a homosexual incestuous relationship because of the biblical epigraph from Kings I 26 "passing the love of woman." Borges based this story on an anecdote, and his chief alteration was "to make the protagonists brothers instead of friends to avoid any homosexual connotation."¹² The protagonist, Juliana, appears to be a character of total passivity. Schaefer says: "Juliana wird von den Brüdern wie eine Sache behandelt, als Individuum hat sie keinerlei Rechte."¹³ Bell-Villada considers her little more than a "vague shadow." While Juliana SEEMS no more than a passive object, she represents a tremendous force; she becomes an obsession and illustrates Jung's anima or destroyer. "She can be a siren, melusina, wood nymph ... or lamia or succubus who infatuates young men and sucks the life out them."¹⁴ Here "sex is portrayed as a disruptive force which incites two loving brothers to murderous hate and brutality."¹⁵ Paradoxically while Juliana shows no emotion unlike the tears we witness in *la Lujanera* and *la Pelirroja*, she in turn evokes murder, the ultimate degree of emotion. Her death is the only possible solution and Cristián says 'ya no hará más perjuicios'" (IV 18). Unconsciously she is the victimizer of the brothers and must become their victim.

Planes, the female character in the story titled *Pedro Salvadores* is one of Borges' strongest characters. For political reasons Pedro Salvadores must hide in the cellar of his house where he remains for many years. His wife, Planes, is an

¹² Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid, *Borges, A Reader* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1981), p. 361.

¹³ (Juliana is treated by the brothers like a thing, she has absolutely no rights as an individual.)

Adelheid Schafer, "Phantastische Elemente und Ästhetische Konzepte im Erzählwerk von Jorge Luis Borges," *Studien zur Romanistik* (Wiesbaden: Humanitas, 1973), p. 87.

¹⁴ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 25.

¹⁵ G.H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1981), p. 189.

extraordinary woman; "la mujer fue despidiendo a la servidumbre—ganó el pan de los dos cosiendo para el ejército. En el decurso de los años tuvo dos hijos; la familia la repudió, atribuyéndolos a un amante" (III 270). Thus Planes controls the life of her husband and keeps him imprisoned much longer than necessary. Is Pedro a political prisoner? Is he imprisoned through Planes' strength of will, or is he a prisoner within his own limitations? Ambiguity is a constant in this short but powerful story.

Female spoiled narcissistic characters

Beatriz in *El Aleph* and Teodolina (Clementina) in *El Zahir* were most likely drawn from Borges' own middle class circle of acquaintances. Several statements in an interview with Richard Burgin (1968) are enlightening when we think of Beatriz or Teodolina; Borges says: "I think men are more prone to metaphysical wondering than women. I think that women take the world for granted." Later when Burgin says of women "they take things one at a time," Borges answers: "Yes they take them one at a time and then they're afraid of cutting a poor figure, or they think of themselves as being actresses, no? the whole world looking at them and of course admiring them."¹⁶

The *aleph* and the *zahir*, although based on fantasy are quite different from each other; intangible vs. concrete, universal transcending vs. limited obsessive. The women who play a part in these stories and who "appear as depositories through which Borges tries to capture the absolute"¹⁷ complement each other and have much in common: Both these stories are told by a narrator i.e. Borges, who is or was in love with the respective woman. In both cases the reader sees the woman through a series of portraits or photographs. Both women belong to the category of the "temptress, the femme fatale, la belle dame sans merci."¹⁸ There is a cryptic mention of oxymoron in connection with both women.¹⁹

Beatriz is a woman of contrasts. Borges describes her in detail: She was "alta, frágil, muy ligeramente inclinada; había en su andar una como graciosa torpeza" (II 350). We know that Beatriz spurned the author, had little intellect (the books given to her remained unread) but at the same time there was something mysterious about this woman; "Beatriz era una mujer, una niña de una clarividencia casi implacable, pero había en ella negligencias, distracciones, desdenes, verdaderas crueldades" (II 356). We know that she died a "brave death" but the banality of her existence is exemplified by the unbelievably obscene letters she had written to her cousin Daneri.

¹⁶ Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), p. 23.

¹⁷ Juan García Ponce, "Who is Borges?" *Denver Quarterly*, 15 i p. 66.

¹⁸ Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges, A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 415.

¹⁹ Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 36.

The description of Teodolina is not as detailed regarding physical aspects, however we know more of her character. She was a perfectionist and "su empeño era más admirable y más duro porque las normas de su credo no eran eternas, sino que se plegaban a los azares de París o de Hollywood" (II 312). Teodolina was in search of the absolute of "the moment." Poverty was unbearable for her and Borges strongly hints of suicide. The duality of the characters is demonstrated by their opposition to the absolute. The two elegant superficial women contrast sharply with, and thus intensify, the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of the aleph and zahir.

Powerful Independent Female Characters

The female protagonist Emma Zunz is not a pawn or instrument but a strong character who initiates and plans a fantastic, yet believable design for revenge. Ronald Christ states that Emma's purpose is to create an historical event by effort of the will; "a shy non-descript girl commits a brilliantly contrived murder."²⁰ Rodríguez Monegal calls Emma Zunz unrealistic since the whole plot is based on the fantastic behavior of the protagonist; "Emma Zunz belongs to that fictional race of beings whose behavior is strange and unbelievable."²¹ Bell-Villada feels that Borges "focuses with a rare intensity, a rich sympathy and authenticity upon the psychology of loss, unformed sexuality and resentment."²² Emma uses her sexuality to achieve a non-sexual goal and according to Robert Lima "eroticism has been used to rectify the injustice done to her father and the debasement she had to suffer."²³ J.B. Hall notes one ambiguity present in the story citing Emma's self deception since we have no proof of Loewenthal's guilt nor of her father's innocence. "Emma for her part concludes that her father has really committed suicide ... but the reader must surely bear in mind that she is mistaken. It is conceivable that her actions are based upon mistaken assumptions which lead to a pointless sacrifice of her honor and the shameful death of an elderly man."²⁴ E.D. Carter, among others calls the story one of "oedipal conflict and sexual neurosis."²⁵

Emma Zunz, a woman not tossed by outside events, can choose her own course of action. What we forget is that she is a young girl who had not seen her father for eight years. She was a child of ten when her father confided to her that Loewenthal was guilty of the embezzlement for which he was blamed. Little of her circumstances is known during those eight years, except that she is basically a shy person who has

²⁰ Ronald Christ, p. 60.

²¹ Rodríguez Monegal, *A Literary Biography*, p. 411.

²² Bell Villada, p. 186.

²³ Robert Lima, "Coitus Interruptus: Sexual Transubstantiation in the Works of Jorge Luis Borges," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1973, p. 414-417.

²⁴ J.B. Hall, "Description or Self Deception? The Essential Ambiguity of Borges in Emma Zunz," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 18 (1982), p. 261.

²⁵ Carter, p. 17.

a few girl friends, that she is pathologically afraid of sex and that she eschews violence of any kind. "Emma se declaró como siempre contra toda violencia." (II 278). Presumably she has lived a very lonely existence since her father left (her mother had died earlier) so that the letter telling of her father's death and the realization that she is now totally alone in the world, becomes the impetus for her stratagem of revenge. Here Borges, not generally known for his psychological insight, gives us a masterful description. Upon reading the letter "su primera impresión fue de malestar en el vientre y en las rodillas; luego de ciega culpa, de irrealidad, de frío, de temor" (II 277). In addition to the shock, her guilt for not having shared her secret and the fact that she herself is working for Loewenthal intensify her feelings. Her plan is brilliantly conceived and despite her hatred of violence, she fears the violation more than the killing. "Pensó que la etapa final sería menos horrible que la primera" (II 279). She carefully chooses a coarse sailor and they serve each other as tools; for pleasure and revenge respectively. She rehearses how she will make Loewenthal confess. Later, upon facing him, her outrage at her own violation is so great that she shoots him before the planned confrontation. She therefore defeats her own purpose. She is the victimizer but she has also become the victim, not only because she had to be violated in order to carry out her plan, but also a victim in the sense that she did not really achieve her goal which was a confession followed by punishment. Thus the child-woman who is capable of devising a diabolical plot and commit the perfect crime is both executioner and victim of her own devising.

María Justina Rubio de Jáuregui is the widowed daughter of a minor hero in the story *La señora mayor*. For the celebration of her hundredth birthday, her daughter, Julia, prepares her for the encounter with the guests and journalists. "Julia, asistida por la sirvienta la acicaló, como si ya estuviera muerta" (IV 47). Borges relates a pathetic picture of old age. María Justina Rubio is completely unaware of the activities around her and she spends her days in a kind of half sleep. The duality here is one of time. The revolution of 1890 is more real to the old lady than the First World War. She speaks of "godos" instead of Spaniards, as her ancestors had done, and uses place names which had long been altered. The Minister of War to honor the memory of her father, is to join the birthday celebration. The whole family is in a state of excitement and expectation but the recipient of the honor is completely unaware of her surroundings. The old lady does not utter a sound "acaso ya no sabía quien era" (IV 48). The next morning the newspapers "ponderaron la casi milagrosa retentiva de la hija del prócer" (IV 48). Although the old woman is still alive and present in the flesh, her spirit is completely submerged in the past.

Clara Glencairn and Marta Pizarra are the rival protagonists in the story *El Duelo*. Clara, an abstract painter is described as "altiva y alta y de fogoso pelo rojo" (IV 49). Formerly married to a Canadian, she is now widowed. Marta Pizarra, a portrait painter is her rival. The "duel" may have its roots in a possible liaison

between Clara's husband and Marta's sister but this is unimportant in the larger context of the relationship of these two individuals. Both artists create, not because they must do so out of their nature, but rather to impress and/or challenge each other. Clara Glencairn "pintaba contra Marta y de algún modo para Marta" (IV 53). We witness a love/hate relationship and once Clara dies, Marta's life has lost all meaning and purpose. The duality is here expressed in a broader sense; the two become "one" only in their relationship to each other and are nothing without each other. The idea of this dependency based on love or hatred is treated in other stories and is carried to its extreme in the violent struggle of the two men in the story titled *El otro duelo* where two gaucho life-long rivals destined to fight on the same side as soldiers are captured and forced to run a race after being half decapitated. In one of Borges' most gruesome stories the description of the two rival men, is also fitting for Clara and Marta: "sin sospecharlo, cada uno(a) de los dos se convirtió en esclavo[a] de otro[s]" (IV 56).

Aunt Florentina, a character in the story *Juan Maraña*, must as other Borgean personae act out her destiny. Juan Maraña's nephew Trapani relates the story. The young boy lived with his mother and her widowed sister-in-law, aunt Florentina. His mother had never liked her brother-in-law but aunt Florentina seems to mourn her husband who had been "a man of action." In reality Juan Maraña, a man with a shady past had left his wife destitute. Aunt Florentina feels ambivalent toward her husband but "she deludes herself into denying the painful fact that he has left her to fend for herself alone."²⁶ Trapani describes Florentina as "flaca y huesada, era o parecía muy alta" (IV 38). Borges hints at a touch of madness or at least queerness, since this woman mourns her husband to such an extent that she only wears black, never goes out, steals and hides food and speaks to herself. Trapani's mother and Florentina are threatened with eviction but unexpectedly Mr. Lucchesi, owner of their house is killed. Aunt Florentina who "becomes" Juan Maraña is able to kill the landlord while at the same time "aveng[ing] herself on him because he has disappointed her."²⁷ In addition to the intangible duality of love/hate, Borges adds the duality of man/knife. Florentina represents man-woman/knife. Since it is the knife which does the actual killing, her lack of guilt and absolute conviction that Maraña had done the deed become plausible.

Ulrica, one of Borges' last stories is unique in its theme of carnal love depicted in a positive way. The narrator Javier Otárola, an elderly Colombian professor whose name reminds us of Otálora in *El muerto*, has a brief "love affair" with the Norwegian woman Ulrica, while on vacation in York, England. Analogous to the *Aleph* and *Zahir*, the narrator is involved with a woman, but in Ulrica the woman is a living sensual being rather than a memory. Ulrica is "ligera y alta de rasgos

²⁶ Mary Lusky Friedman, *The Emperor's Kites A Morphology of Borges' Tales* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 191.

²⁷ Friedman, p. 193.

afilados y de ojos grises" (IV 112). Dressed in black, she complements the snow in which she is walking. She initiates the affair on her own terms, declaring both time and place. García Ponce when speaking of some of Borges' fiction says: "fantasy is left contaminated by reality and reality in turn takes on a fantastic nature although within [a] highly realistic tone."²⁸ This statement is especially applicable to the story of Ulrica where the fantastic aspects are the two inns of the same name and the howling of the wolves. Ulrica has an air of mystery about her and the lovers call each other Sigurd and Brynhild thus taking on "other" names. The duality however lies not so much in the character of Ulrica as in the circumstances. If Thorngate Inn is suddenly called Northern Inn and wolves (which do not exist in England) are heard to howl, then we may ask "is Ulrica herself dream or reality? The narrator compares the adventure to a dream and in the introduction of *Libro de arena*, Borges mentions the affinity between *Ulrica* and *El Otro*. In *El Otro* Borges says: "si esta mañana y este encuentro son sueños, cada uno de los dos tiene que pensar que el soñador es él. Tal vez dejemos de soñar, tal vez no" (IV 105). After the "sexual" union of the narrator and his ephemeral "lover" the narrator says "poseí por primera y última vez la IMAGEN de Ulrica." (IV 114).

Although the number of female characters in Borges' fiction is small, those he has created are as real as many of his male personae. Borges places man's/woman's anguished lonesome existence within a framework of logic in order to achieve some sort of order but the result is invariably cosmic estrangement. John Updike was right when he stated: "Femaleness far from being identified with, is felt as an estrangement which blends with man's cosmic estrangement."²⁹ In their duality female characters like their male counterparts, are caught in the labyrinth of time and existence. Borges said that multiple interpretations of a short story enhance it: "la obra que perdura es siempre capaz de una infinita y plástica ambigüedad; es todo para todos, como el Apóstol, es un espejo que declara los rasgos del lector y es también un mapa del mundo" (III 98). The essence of multiple interpretations is often dependent on duality resulting in typical Borgesian ambiguity. This ambiguity forces the reader to become an active participant, make a choice for himself/herself and lastly create his/her own fiction.

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²⁸ Ponce, p. 66.

²⁹ John Updike, "The Author as Librarian," *The New Yorker*, 30 Oct. 1965, p. 235.