

A Postmodern Vision of Cuba from Exile: Daína Chaviano and *The Island of Eternal Love*

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With *The Island of Eternal Love* (Miami, 2006), author Daína Chaviano joins a growing list of authors writing about the Cuban nation through the lens of family sagas. Among them, the work of Hilda Pereda (*Los Robedal*, Miami, 1987) and Julio Travieso Serrano (*El polvo y el oro*, Cuba, 1998) stand out for their allegories of a Cuba where different political discourses and ideas come into conflict without disrupting a collective identity driven by dominant principles that legitimize it as a nation.

Chaviano's novel, unlike those of the authors mentioned, consists of another, purely literary allegory, which does not depict the nation through an ideal national history identified as the base of its independence but rather the opposite: that is, the nation as a consequence of independence, with various particularities and defects inherited from its long period as a colony and as a hybrid cultural system produced by the mixing of the races, customs and creeds which encountered one another there.

Chaviano manages this reconceptualization by applying her own model of inclusion/exclusion regarding the constitutive elements of "the nation". In doing so, she substitutes historical fact – considered up to now as incontrovertible, being possessive of a structure, time and space whose character can be proven – with another, more original kind which, while still historical, relies on *difference* to constitute new entities such as space travel, divided national identity and exile.

She also introduces other, parallel elements which modify the traditional sense of reality. Magic, that paralogical element, lends mystery and energy to the novel, permits the development of its characters and creates parallels between Cuba and the character Cecilia. Both Cuba and Cecilia constitute two, initially isolated



thematic focal points in a common narrative, oscillating between light and shadow before finally superimposing themselves.

Even with the author's apparent interest in reconstructing the nation, the category of family predominates as a source of dramatic energy for a fragmented, discontinuous narrative. Multiple meta-narratives describe the 18th century arrival to the Island of three different families, with each one standing in for the three basic ethnic and cultural identities involved in the nation's formation: the family of Clara and Pedro, who hail from Cuenca, Spain; that of Dayo, slave brought from the kingdom of Ifá, Nigeria; and that of Pag Chiang, from Canton, China.

It seems interesting that Chaviano, unlike other authors, cites the Chinese component in the national foundation. And she doesn't just include it, but deals at length with its food, traditions, creeds and culture in general. The exchanges between this community and other cultures in the country are especially stressed – as in the case of the Chinese and Spanish languages, Sanfancón/Shangó syncretism and the participation of the Chinese community in the second war of Cuban independence, where the dignity and heroism of its members is honored:

“Never was there a Chinese Cuban deserter;
Never was there a Chinese Cuban traitor” (1)

(Chaviano 345)

The racial divisions disappear when the white family and that of African descent unite through the marriage of María de las Mercedes (born in 1889) and José (born in 1887); the Chinese family remains isolated until Pag Li or Pablo (born 1926) marries Amalia (also born in 1926), daughter of María de las Mercedes and José, bringing to a head the metaphorical integration of the three ethnicities.

The story of families/nations plays out through the part of male character Miguel, while the second metaphorical element, Cecilia, has a short family history which sees her living alone in Miami a few years after abandoning the island. It's known only that her parents died in an accident, and that her aunt – her link to her ancestors – also lives in Miami. Although the male family's story is the one set down, it's told in the voice of Pablo's wife Amalia, who fills it with feminine details, judgments and emotions.

Among the various plot devices used by Chaviano, intertextuality – with the use of her own texts – stands out, with the inclusion of character Gaia and the haunted house seen in *Casa de juegos* (Chaviano. Planeta, 1999). The house, seen now in Miami, passes into this new novel as a symbol, as a continuity or sign of origin of



Cuba, revealing the soul of the place wherever it appears. In Havana, the house was a compact entity, a reflection of traditions and creeds which became diabolic, while in Miami, its contents softened with the concepts of love and family.

In Miami, the house comes to represent two coherent spaces: Cuba (appearing only through dates of patriotic import) and a “someone” which is initially unknown but later turns out to be the character Cecilia. This metaphorical swing or change is perceived in the way the house makes its appearances, which later in the work occur only on dates of familial importance, all of them connected to Cecilia and coming at the same time, because its inhabitants turn out to be the dead family members of said character. Cecilia discovers new and positive values in this magical vision which they relate to her, as an individual character, with the Island as a nation, and thanks to this she is able to find herself.

Making use of creative and well-elaborated images in an almost poetic prose, Daína Chaviano gives us in her text a singular vision of our nation. A pluralist vision that stands apart from formal conventions. A vision that shows a national space emerging from converging cultural traditions stemming from many parts of the world and which re-codify themselves in a common exile. A vision of a space rich in tradition, music, artists, food, creeds that remain with those who no longer live on the Island but feel that they are a part of it. This was the hybrid identity which the character Cecilia encountered and accepted, to fill her soul with peace and happiness.

Notes

- (1) Inscription appearing on the monument to Chinese combatants in the second War of Cuban Independence on Línea and L, Vedado, Havana.

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