

Counterpoint of Two *Cubanazos*: The Representation of Masculine Discourse in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*

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In an essay titled “La diferencia cubana,” historian Rafael Rojas proposes that “[eso] que llamamos la cultura cubana, no es más que la construcción simbólica, en el lapso de dos siglos, del metarrelato de la identidad nacional; un metarrelato que postula un sujeto: el Sujeto Blanco, Masculino, Heterosexual Católico o Marxista, cuyos valores históricos legitiman los discursos y las prácticas hegemónicas de las élites nacionales” (Rojas 105). In the last decade, several Cuban women writers have emerged, both on and off the island, who have challenged this patriarchal view of Cuban culture, and in their literature offer a more hybrid and fluid concept of both national as well as gender and sexual identity.

This study focuses on the novel *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, the first work written and published in exile by Daína Chaviano (La Habana, Cuba). Chaviano, winner of several international awards, is precisely one of those contemporary Cuban women narrators whose works question a masculine view of Cuban identity. Poet, short-story writer, and novelist, her literary production spans several periods and styles and reflect her interest in women’s role in society.

As is the case with most of her work produced on the island, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* has as its base the fantastic or marvelous. In fact, the novel centers on a young Cuban woman, Claudia, who has the ability of seeing and speaking to ghosts from the past, and who, through time travel, present her with Cuba’s real history. Weaved into these fantastic narrations, one finds a critical and open exposition of the Cuban crisis and the Special Period. In this novel, an amalgam of the fantastic and crude realism, Chaviano directly and indirectly inserts and



appropriates works from the Cuban Canon. In this way, Chaviano questions and reinterprets official Cuban history, both of the Revolution and the Republic, and simultaneously exposes the masculine and patriarchal discourses that have dominated the nation. Most striking is the way in which Chaviano achieves this, through the adoption and appropriation of the counterpoint as a literary technique.

The counterpoint gives Chaviano the opportunity to present various narrative voices within the narration, helping to reveal the contradictory situation dominating Cuban society. Even more importantly, through the presentation of these diverse voices, and specifically the use of a counterpoint of two masculine voices, Chaviano explores the ways in which the individual participates in society while remaining on the margins, indicative of what the critic Homi Bhabha calls “the pedagogical” and “the performative” of the nation (Bhabha 299). That is, although one finds a strong criticism of the dominant discourse on the part of the masculine protagonists that Chaviano presents us, these continue to perpetuate patriarchal ideas on women. Their counterpoint reveals ideas and attitudes present before the Cuban Revolution, ideas that have survived through time, despite official revolutionary rhetoric’s claims to the contrary.

According to the Pequeño Larousse dictionary’s definition, the term ‘*contrapunteo*’ (counterpoint) signifies “disputa” (dispute) (Larousse 270). The counterpoint is, therefore, a dispute “punto contra punto” (point against point), an argument over any topic, with the goal of standing out, boasting, as well as winning an argument against the other person with whom you compete. Although the counterpoint is not, according to its definition, a masculine endeavor, in the Cuban case it has been associated with masculine discourse. In rural society, for example, we have the case of *el punto guajiro*, a popular and original improvisation sung by Cuban *guajiros* or country folk. One might argue, that *el punto guajiro* is a form of masculine performance, both rural and verbal, in which each *guajiro* narrates his particular abilities through *el punto* to his neighbors and in this manner competes, as well as displays his masculinity in the presences of his contemporaries.

If indeed *el punto guajiro* represents the most well known popular Cuban counterpoint, the work of Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, is the best example of the intellectual counterpoint, precisely because of its textual nature. In his work, Ortiz uses the counterpoint to document the history of two products, tobacco and sugar, and to emphasize the ways in which these two aided in the development of Cuban culture. Ortiz takes these two products, indispensable to Cuba’s economy, and centers on their specific and opposing



characteristics, to argue that they symbolically represent the racial and diverse composition of the Cuban nation.

In *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, Chaviano returns to Ortiz's work and to the counterpoint to present us with two Cuban men, two *cubanazos*, who compete with another for the word and for the same woman. One can argue, then, that Chaviano appropriates the Cuban tradition of the counterpoint on various levels, on the one hand the popular element of the dispute (the masculine voices in competition, in an informal manner), and on the other, in a textual or formal way, (through the presentation of different narrative voices and their stories, as well as through the intertextual references which appear within the text). Chaviano uses the counterpoint as a narrative technique, not only in her novel's organization or structure, but also in the representation of various discourses, especially the Cuban masculine one.

Before delving into the discourse and masculine counterpoint, it's important to clarify that the narration in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* is complex for various reasons. First, each chapter offers a different narrative voice, with jumps between first person and third person narrators. And secondly, the work does not follow a chronological order; it goes from present to past, returning to the protagonists' history, as well as that of the island of Cuba.

Although a more detailed study would take into account the particular voices and the presence of the fantastic within this work, this analysis centers solely on the first person narrations of the two masculine protagonists, Ruben and Gilberto, old friends who have had a relationship, albeit unknowingly and in different moments, with the same woman, Claudia/La Mora. Through the masculine counterpoint of these two men, Chaviano accomplishes two objectives. On the one hand, these masculine voices reveal the inherent and existent contradictions within revolutionary Cuban society, which appear throughout the work. But at the same time, this counterpoint exposes the Cuban masculine discourse, that of the supposed New Man (Hombre Nuevo), to reveal the impossibility of change within Cuban society.

This counterpoint between these two 'hyper machos', which in popular jargon are called '*cubanazos*', reflect, on the one hand, the sexist attitudes of both men, but at the same time show their inability of changing the socioeconomic system in which they live. In the same way that these men's counterpoint reveals a competition and desire to excel, each one exaggerating his manhood and representing his masculinity through his word, their narrations offer a specific critique of the



political situation. Nevertheless, at the end of the work, their counterpoint is unsuccessful, it fails to resolve or change their lives. What Chaviano suggests in this work is that the Cuban man must continue to play the role of the macho, but without the ability of controlling either his woman, or his own destiny. The Cuban man must continue to “play” the role of the revolutionary. He must “play the game” as Heberto Padilla suggested in his poetry collection *Fuera de Juego*, but without ever forgetting that the rules of the game are often changed from above; as an individual he cannot change them. His verbal exaggerations only signal the abundance of empty words. The counterpoint of two *cubanazos* becomes a sort of emotional release; chatter that does not lead to any change.

The novel begins with Ruben’s narration, directed at his ‘*compadre*’ or ‘*asere*’, Gilberto. The characters of Ruben and Gilberto are important, not only because of what they reveal about society, but also because they represent Cuba’s racial diversity, as Ruben is mulatto and Gilberto white. That is, Chaviano once again plays with Ortiz and his counterpoint. Ruben and Gilberto complement and compete with each other in the same way that tobacco (mulatto) and sugar (white) do. Therefore, Chaviano appropriates Ortiz and his work in various ways, as she does with other works, in order to present her vision of contemporary Cuban society.

The intertextual elements in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* are also manifested in the language and Cuban popular jargon that Chaviano inserts within the work, and especially in Ruben and Gilberto’s counterpoint. These men use a male vocabulary of friendship, which includes words such as ‘*brother*’, ‘*asere*’, ‘*compadre*’, ‘*mi hermano*’ and ‘*socio*’, as well as the bad words or vulgarity associated with masculine discourse. According to Robert A. Strikwerdas and Larry May in “Male Friendship and Intimacy,” one of the most common forms of friendship among men is what they call camaraderie, that is, an exchange of certain intimate experiences that occur among men in very specific spaces, such as the trenches among soldiers, or at high sea, among sailors (Strikwerdas 81-82). These masculine exchanges occur in moments of stress or danger, and are a result of long periods of time without activity during which time chatting over personal matters allows for the formation of an intimate friendship. This ‘*compadraje*’ develops as a result of the discovery of common experiences. In the case of the novel, Ruben and Gilberto seem to have a common bond; they speak to each other in the familiar “tú” form and exchange expressions that denote a masculine brotherhood. This element of ‘*compadrería*’ between Ruben and Gilberto underscores even more the popular element of the counterpoint. An example of this union between them appears in a



narration by Ruben, in which he recalls the good old days, the moment they met and became friends, to later explain how life becomes complicated and punishing.

"Es que la vida te hace cada mierda... Estudias como un burro, trabajas como un imbécil, y cuando crees que puedes sentarte a vivir de verdad, ahí mismo aparece algo que te desgracia la existencia. Claro, en mi caso no fue una sola cosa, fueron un burujón, pero la principal de todas fue Claudia... Nunca conocí a una tipa como ella: era más rara que un cementerio al mediodía. Por eso me embarqué. Me enamoré como un idiota. De no haber sido como era, a lo mejor me habría acostado con ella y un par de veces y luego si-te-veo-no-me-acuerdo. Pero no. Tuve que fijarme en la tipa más intrigante que se cruzó en mi camino. Yo creo que me amarró. Algún trabajito debió de hacerme. No es que la sorprendiera en algo sospechoso; nunca vi que anduviera en brujerías ni nada de eso, pero en este país uno nunca sabe con las mujeres. Te lo digo por experiencia: no hay que fiarse de ninguna, por muy graduada universitaria que sea."(Chaviano 17)

In this narration, Ruben has several complaints. First he insinuates that Claudia has trapped him, perhaps through witchcraft, and for this reason cannot remove her image from his mind. In his narration, Claudia appears crazy and has made him crazy as well. He then complains about women in general, declaring that men cannot live with or without them. In their conversations, these men appear to look for support from one another, from the 'compadre' who has also 'suffered' at the hands of women, and at the same time shows a form of masculine exaggeration. In these exaggerated narrations, Ruben and Gilberto incorporate humor that serves to expose what each man says about his own manliness. That is, instead of exaggerating their romantic conquests, through their counterpoint these men reveal their failure with women. Women are the ones who are in control, and each man appears to battle against that control and the irrationality of their personal situation.

Ruben is not the only character who struggles to understand "his woman". In his response, four chapters later, Gilberto declares that his "Mora" is worse than Claudia. He tells Ruben, "y eso que tú no conociste a La Mora. Al lado de ella, Claudia es un niña de teta" (32) and adds that "La Mora me saló la vida" (32). As with Ruben, Gilberto finds women incomprehensible, and calls them "animales misteriosos" (135). Using colloquial or street language, both men try to come out on top, incorporating humor in their speech as a way of exaggerating their narration



even more. In their monologues, Ruben and Gilberto attempt to show their virility and manhood, commenting on their romantic problems and simultaneously speaking about the Cuban situation. It's this political situation that unites the men more, their brotherhood goes beyond the actual time they've known each other, it continues growing due to the contradictions that both suffer, not only in romance, but also due to the sociopolitical situation. They listen to each other in order to later compare their own experiences with that of the other. In their counterpoint, each man narrates specific problems he has had within revolutionary society, exceeding more each time as they do in their narrations on women. Their political comments appear with those on women, stressing even more the way in which politics influences even the personal. After a narration on his problems with Claudia, Ruben begins to criticize those contradictions present in Cuban society:

"Y pensar que hace tres años te metían preso si te cogían con un dólar en el bolsillo. Pero así es la cosa en este país. Lo que hoy está prohibido, mañana --por obra y gracia del Espíritu Santo-- ya no lo está. O al revés. Y eso es lo que más me encabrona: no saber nunca a qué atenerme, vivir a la buena de Dios, vigilando a ver dónde piso no vaya a ser que me hunda en un agujero que el día antes no estaba. Qué va, mi socio, con esta intriga no hay quien viva; yo creo que por eso hay tantos suicidios. Quizás si la miseria fuera parejita, a lo mejor uno la sobrellevaba mejor; pero lo malo es que te han engañado. Todo el puto día diciéndote que aquí todo se reparte igual, y al final resulta que hay algunos que sí tienen de todo porque son los que la administran, mientras el resto se muere de hambre."
(60)

Ruben's complaints reveal how the inconsistencies of the system can lead to suicide, trauma or madness, since the individual never knows what to expect. Gilberto's response, several chapters later, reflects his friend's comments. In his monologue, Gilberto comments on how he studied Economics at the University to later discover he had chosen a career without a future. After graduating, he spends two years looking for work, proposing useless projects, until he finally meets Toño, a butcher, who offers him a more practical job and he says:

"Te lo juro. En este país, ser carnicero es mejor que ser médico. Todo el mundo te respeta, te trata bien, se ofrece para resolverte cualquier problema, desde soldarte una tubería rota hasta conseguirte un turno para comer en La Torre. Saben que eres un tipo poderoso que tiene en sus manos el reparto de la carne; el oro de los pobres." (86)



Though his words are not necessarily a complaint, since Gilberto apparently has power as a butcher, this narration reveals a society in which the individual must adapt to the surroundings in order to be able survive. Both men must learn to 'resolver' (to make do) in a country more contradictory by the minute. Although they are able to 'resolver', neither Ruben nor Gilberto can maintain their wiliness indefinitely, since as Ruben states, what is legal one day, is illegal the next. Their survival depends, then, on a continual re-adaptation. At the end, both men discover that they no longer can, nor want, to continue this re-adapting, and decide to abandon the island by raft.

To conclude, with their counterpoint, Ruben and Gilberto represent their masculinity and at the same time criticize those aspects of society with which they disagree. However, their counterpoint does not resolve nor change the life of either one.

In *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, Chaviano suggests that both men and women in this society find themselves trapped. The Cuban man continues to play the role of 'macho' but without the power to change the country's sociopolitical structure. Though in their counterpoint Ruben and Gilberto boast about their virility and manhood, they also manifest their impotence on various levels. First, despite their patriarchal attitudes, apparent in their words, neither is really capable of controlling his "woman". Their inability of maintaining women by their side is both a result of their lack of understanding of and sexist attitude toward women, as well as due to the political and social circumstances out of their control. Their impotence is double: on both a personal and socioeconomic level. Despite their constant laments, neither Ruben nor Gilberto manage to make effective or real changes in society. On the contrary, their society expects them to "sacrifice" and adapt continuously to situations ever more paradoxical.

These men remain relegated to only chatter, participants in an endless masculine counterpoint. Their exaggerations, complaints, curses and colloquial expressions are indicative of an empty and null masculine rhetoric. The chatter and the counterpoint develop then as an emotional release but without the possibility of effecting any change in society.



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