

*THE BREEZE CAME IN DECEMBER, MARVEL MORENO'S CARIBBEAN  
NOVEL*

Barranquilla, "that dusty city where concentration is impossible and reflection useless" is a topic of Marvel Moreno's Caribbean narrative. Located by a river, very near the sea, Barranquilla seems to drift into the swamps, to stagnate in the margins of time, to refuse its share of change and progress. However, in a climate of blazing heat, and "a sun created to hurt the eyes of man"<sup>1</sup>, traditions of race and religion founder: to keep their privileges, some families must relinquish their rank and status the social climbers, rich immigrants, emerging classes. An evolving society, certainly, but also a static one, a society that refuses any possibility of change as far as women are concerned. They must remain submissive and resigned, today, like yesterday, like tomorrow. Who would dare defy a father, a son, a husband, a lord-and-master? In some of her short stories, Moreno has already related feminine images to codes of machismo and paternalism. This, her first novel, evokes the tragic complicity of women in a society defined as masculine.

Fastidious, moralizing, elaborate to exaggeration, this chronicle, homage to three sisters born with the century, demands of its author the qualities of an interpreter or a memorialist. If in some of Moreno's short stories, oral discourse consists mainly of dialogue, in this novel one finds reported speech, that is to say, whatever is heard, remembered, pondered, transcribed. Because she dissimulates her identity as a narrator and avoids using the first person, the protagonist is more of a witness, in that, rather than her own story, she tells those of the people who were related to her three powerful ancestors: her grandmother and her two aunts. They were women of another epoch, of another kind, women who were both an example and an enigma, and who unfortunately died without revealing their secrets.

THE THREE FAIRY GOOMOTHERS

Lina, the protagonist, remembers her grandmother as a frail woman, with her white hair gathered in a bun and dressed like a lady who had once been rich. Her fondness for biblical quotations gave her an air of wisdom and her pokers of observation allowed her to analyze people through "a mechanism known only to her". Partly a seer and partly a

visionary, "she kept the past in her memory and from its assimilation and contemplation, she inferred the present and even the future with a vague sadness". This sadness, which was really lucidity, tinged her reflections on a society that instilled in women the role of victims and in men that of violent tyrants. Listening to her, Lina anxiously used to wonder about "the tragic destiny which fate had condemned her to"(p.10). What arms could she use to defend herself? Her grandmother thought hate was nonsense, because it rejected comprehension and comprehension was "a *sine qua non* condition of equilibrium"(p.22). Instead of hating, one should consider, understand, tolerate... From earliest youth, Lina had tried to follow her advice. However, there had been circumstances which forced her to break this precious rule, as in the case of Benito Suarez, her friend Dora's husband. How could Lina bear his beating and humiliating her friend because she was not a virgin when she married? How could Lina tolerate his throwing Dora out of her own home for any reason? How could Lina let him lock her friend up in a psychiatric clinic so he could carry on with another woman? In defense of Dora, in her legitimate defense, Lina dared to threaten, denounce, intimidate, hurt. Fortunately, under the circumstances, her grandmother demanded no explanations.

However, Lina's nimbleness, her courage when she had improvised her role as an adversary, vanished when she was confronted with an ambiguous situation: she not only had to master the aggressor but also had to convince his wife to abandon him and fight back. What to do? Dora lacked strength and most of all, willpower. By the time Benito Suarez had abandoned her and -taking his violence too far become an outlaw, his wife had grown prematurely old and debilitated by sickness. Dora, as always, was a victim... She had been so and would continue to be so, like her own mother, who had been forced to marry a vulgar and cowardly individual, like her grandmother, who had been handed over when a mere child to a gentleman from a family "in which nobody had worked for the last five hundred years"(p.15). An aristocratic marriage? Yes, but nonetheless humiliating and hard to bear. As a means of social promotion or as an obligatory sacrament, marriage enchained and enslaved women. In their sexual life, they were supposed to be passive, chaste and decent. And if this "decent" frigidity gave way to desire, they were threatened with being diagnosed as hysterical. Poor new brides, anxiety came with the first somatic arousal: "condemned to live it in

relationship with their husbands, they thought they even owed them the autonomy of their own anguish"<sup>2</sup>.

Anxious women, suffering women, dependent women... This irredeemable victimization of women, which was a source of reflection for the grandmother, used to anger -Aunt Eloisa. As a widow and mother of several daughters, she had managed to live according to a scale of values "on which she placed herself above all the contingencies of ordinary women". To her, femininity implied "a certain harmony with nature, a certain integration into its rhythms"(p.110). Anticipating the theories of many of today's anthropologists, she believed in a matriarchal ancestry: wasn't the first social structure composed of a mother and her offspring? Unfortunately, throughout the centuries, women had lost "a very precious knowledge" which was imperative to regain<sup>3</sup>. Only by assuming their femininity, by recognizing themselves and knowing themselves thoroughly, would they be able to transcend the position of inferiority and dependency in which patriarchal society kept them. Fortunately, Aunt Eloisa was not the only follower of these theories... Through her, Lina met Divina Arriaga and her daughter Catalina, both free and liberated, both antagonized by a city that forgave them neither their intelligence nor their beauty. To compensate, Divina traveled over five continents and Catalina dedicated her time to the commerce of art, after having learned to manipulate people by recognizing the existence of "the puppet that contracts with hate or shudders with pride behind each person"(p.167).

Impressed by these exceptional women, Lina tried to help another friend in distress; a friend who was related to still another elderly relative of hers, the third in the trinity of "fairy godmothers". Aunt Irene was beautiful and musical. As a pianist, she traveled frequently and when she returned to Barranquilla, she lived in an immense and labyrinthine mansion, surrounded by gardens where there were "so many trees that their foliage mingled and no ray of light dissipated the dank penumbra where plants of dusky colors bloomed"(p.226). While Lina's grandmother taught her to be lucid and cautious and Aunt Eloisa gave her confidence in her own femininity, Aunt Irene allowed her to discover the world of dreams and mysteries. Perhaps on account of that, Lina preferred to speak to her about Beatriz, that schoolmate of hers who had strange obsessions. As a child she was given as much to prayer and

penance as to torturing and tearing her dolls apart. As an adolescent she spent her time spying on her neighbours and censuring the way they lived. Her very tragic story, always brought back to Lina the memories of a time of great agitation, spent near Aunt Irene, who was at the time absorbed in the composition of a sonata. Having finished it, she played it on the piano and then threw it away in the wind ~the same night that she herself disappeared. Aunt Irene had been like a shadow channeling Lina's thoughts into "a space where words resounded in the form of an endless questioning echo, like serpentine floating in the infinite" (p.251).

A NOVEL OF HISPANIC, COLONIAL, CARIBBEAN TRADITION  
*The breeze came in December...* a novel of Hispanic, colonial, Caribbean tradition. A novel about women, a novel that portrays them as paradigms for successive generations. A novel of feminine, multiple reflecting codes: if the semantic code implies woman/body signifiers, merged in images that interact, the cultural code adds links between the feminine characters and the beliefs and habits of society. Beliefs and habits, which are accepted but still refused: the ambiguity of the discourse is easily observed in paraphrases and connotations. But, above all, in the subjugation represented by the exercise of power and the manipulation of eroticism. Throughout the text, femininity emerges like a structuring factor in the stories inspired by three characters from the past (the grandmother, Aunt Eloisa, Aunt Irene), dominated by three characters from the present (Dora, Catalina, Beatriz), and linked to interrelated secondary characters. Each character contributes her own story -a recollected, commented, transmitted story~ thanks to an intercrossing of voices which converge in the protagonist. This protagonist, who is simultaneously an emitter and a receptor of an implied message in the combination of anecdotes and memories, contributes to both identification and distance. This protagonist is, of course, Lina: as a child, as an adolescent, as a woman, as an adversary, as an associate, Lina always present and yet always absent; an enigmatic narrator.

*The breeze came in December...* a narration bathed by and about women. As a temporary issue, happy or unhappy, the male presence fosters intertextual communication and facilitates the linking of episodes bringing about an urgency to reveal mysteries or to solve conflicts. At the same time, the narrative sequences concentrate the

woman/body signifiers in projections of abuse and violence. Abuse, violence, which are unforgivable and unforgettable. As the protagonist remembers, facts emerge in disorder: scattered and fragmentary, they hinder lineal discourse. Lina begins her chronicle "in the autumn of her life, after having learned to listen to herself without rebelliousness, without pretensions"(p.10). In her story, the temporal levels -the narrator's and the story's separate in the beginning only to merge in the end, when Lina recognizes herself as being a mature woman who writes and remembers. It is through remembering and through writing that she is able to contemplate the future as well as the past, thus dominating the trajectory of time. It is remembered time, time that drifts, advances, retreats, doubles back on itself. Employing the presence of the three elderly ladies as an articulating mechanism, the narrator mingles the prophetic with the real in a double game which suggests that time is both transitory and stationary. Perhaps because of that, her reflections, often fatalistic, conceive the oppression of women and their permanent submissiveness as metaphors of stagnant time.

#### THE COMPULSION OF "FEUILLETON"

Stagnant time... following a tradition of centuries, the image of docile, suffering women, inspires an antithetical classification of tyrannical and perverse women. In this novel, however, the latter seem more convincing in the role of "castrating mothers" than in that of cruel beauties, too close to the stereotype of courtesans, adulteresses and "bitches" described by Zola and other decadent writers. To D'Annunzio, who is in turn a plagiarist of Swinburne, we owe the description of a woman who was "malefic, ardent with pride, full of vengeance, hungry for power and gold"<sup>4</sup>. She could very well preside in the dynasty of Divinas, Catalinas, Victorias and Leonores of Barranquilla. Perhaps it should now be said that if an intermingling of "feuilletonesque" and realist discourse activates and promotes well-placed transferences of significations in the text, there are, nevertheless, chapters that overlap with the "kitsch" of luxuries and miseries which precede love-stories, incidents and acts of vengeance. Everyday life often has a "romanesque" make-up which is not dissimulated by occasional bluntness and colloquialism. This is reflected in the feigned delirium of so many characters immersed in melodrama. Surely, all those are "feuilletonesque"<sup>5</sup> models, models that are handled with

irony in the text, but which all the same reappear again and again by an insidious compulsion.

#### CLASSIST SOCIETY/RACIST SOCIETY

Fortunately, this compulsion of the "feuilletonesque" does not stifle a discourse that focuses social conflicts and concentrates on differences of class and status. Lina's family and acquaintances are marked by idiosyncrasies of *costeño* social hierarchies. Morals of dissimulation cannot hinder writing, which delves into truth: the background male characters define themselves in terms of money and power. The code of honor imposes its tradition on a society of hyperbolic machismo characterized by violence and domination, not only towards women but also towards the working class. In a decadent and corrupt elite, gentlemen, social climbers and immigrants act likewise. The Jewish colony is "a model of organization: headed by a rabbi and three millionaires who excel in finesse and diplomacy with the local politicians, and who also excel in obedience to biblical "precepts". Thanks to them, hundreds of Jews enter the country between the two world wars"(p.130). Lina's father, who is of Sephardic origin, is a man of great kindness and generosity; she inherits his hatred of fascism and his liberal-leftist ideology.

A classist society is a racist society... The importance of black culture in Marvel Moreno's narrative has already been pointed out<sup>6</sup>. In this novel she not only praises black cultural values, but denounces how Barranquilla's families "refused to mingle their blood with the blood of a race which was condemned by the Bible, and were afraid of transmitting to their offspring the dark and lascivious demons against which religion was to no avail"(p.29). The mulatto woman, who represent a stereotype of promiscuity in the Antillean and colonial tradition<sup>7</sup>(7), are still victims of rape and often give birth to children who later deny their own ancestry. Rich mestizos, social misfits like Dora's father and Catalina's husband, proliferate in a sectarian society full of racial prejudice.

And... once more, inversely, a racist society is also a classist society: the exploitation of blacks is as evident as that of Indians and peasants. They are all dominated, abused, spoliated. No wonders there have been times when they have rebelled and taken justice into their own hands. This is the case of the Arawak foreman who "during the

years of *violencia*, headed a band of descendants of rebel slaves and wrought havoc among the military patrols which crossed an imaginary and totally arbitrary line he had drawn, and the frightened 'soldiers discovered their officers lying on the ground, victims of mysterious knife and bullet wounds. When returning to their camp, soaked with sweat, their faces covered with annoying mosquito-bites, their eardrums exasperated by the relentless buzz of grasshoppers, they had to explain how on earth they had lost their superiors without having found the shadow of a man in the desolate immensity of the savannah"(p.152).

#### NEITHER RENUNCIATION NOR CAPITULATION

A political novel? A social novel? Above all a novel of great complexity: each character contributes his own story, each story its parable, each parable a message codified by Lina, that untiring narrator. An educational novel? *Bildungsroman*? If the *bildungsroman*, according to Goldmann, must follow the trajectory of a problematic character who searches for authentic values in a degraded society, Lina might well fulfill those conditions. Moreover, at the end of her story there is no renunciation, nor capitulation, but a self-limitation imposed by her own maturity. This child who grows up and gradually learns to deal with the world, certainly manages to avoid extreme or stereotyped behaviour. Neither innocent, nor promiscuous; neither an Amazon, nor a vestal, neither domineering, nor docile, she observes herself and others in order to put down on paper what happened at a given time "in that city of discoloured ceilings and cracked walls"(p.220).

#### OF CONTAGIONS AND CONTEXTS

Marvel Moreno has said that García Marquez can be "contagious" and therefore refrains from reading him<sup>8</sup>. In her novel, however, she cannot avoid a "contagion" which perhaps the Caribbean contexts make inevitable. How could she avoid it? There are paragraphs, pages and chapters in which discourse imposes a feigned naturalness on what is imaginary and incorporates the measureless, the uncommon and the gaudy. If in other chapters there is no delving into primal myths or attempting "magic-realism", there is a tendency to certain dénouements, enumerations, crudities and bluntness, which are all too recognizable. More than Marquez' influence, however, there is that of southern writers like Dreiser, Mc Cullers, O'Connor -rather than Faulkner. Then, inevitably, that of nineteenth century masters of the psychological novel (Balzac, Eliot, the

Russians). A harmonic discourse, elaborated in intimacy, tends to be didactic when it handles sentiments and passions. Thus, in the novel, the chapters primarily dedicated to the grandmother remind one of a narrative that encloses "the techniques and rhetorical conventions developed in previous periods of religious-ethical introspection", turning the text into an instrument of analysis, of discrimination and of moral and psychological organization<sup>9</sup>.

Marvel Moreno writes by hand<sup>10</sup>, and her long rhythmical sentences remind one of nineteenth century diaries and letters. If there is oral discourse in her novel, it is tinged with proverbs and nostalgia. Thus, in spite of certain crude scenes, her writing rejects the abrupt, shocking and fragmented discourse of our day. Even when the narrator asserts herself, takes sides or tends towards pamphleteering, recollection avoids confrontation and indirect phrasing relates to the past. Throughout the text, the sumptuousness and exuberance of the descriptions compensate for a narrative that is copious, fastidious, deprived of dialogue and of the present tense. Again and again, a labyrinthine plot, which seems to be embroidered in arabesques, suggests how enigmatic any interpretation of a story can be. And there are multiple, endless stories: the story of Doña Clotilde del Real, the story of Doña Adela Portal y Saavedra, the story of Doña Giovanna Mantini, the story of Berenice, the black woman, the story of Flores, the mulatto woman, the story of Maria Fernanda, the prostitute, of Petulia the courtesan... The story of Genaro Espinosa, of Juan Palos Perez, of Andrés Larosca, of Benito Suárez, of Don Cipriano del Leal, of Evaristo del Puma, of Don Antonio del Corral, of Doctor Vesga, of Doctor Agudelo, of Henk, the bastard, of Chango, the black man... One after the other, they all seem to disappear and reappear again with different faces, gestures, words which always evoke the same December when the breeze brought "that strange sensation of living in a motionless time, during which the craziest wishes could be accomplished" (p.185).

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## <sup>1</sup>NOTES

*En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, Plaza & Janés, Barcelona, 1987, pp. 169, 220, 283. We will quote from that edition.

<sup>2</sup> Assoum Pierre Laurent, *Freud et la Femme*, Calman-Levy, Paris, 1984, p.179

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Moïa Martha I., *La Saumone, Féminaire d'Anthropologie*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1984, p.143.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Mario Praz, in *La Chair, la Mort et le Diable*, Denoel, Paris, 1977, p.230.

<sup>5</sup> The influence of this "feuilletonesque" genre, inherited from Modernism and Decadentism, is especially evident in the chapters consecrated to Paris at the turn of the century and during the war. Divina Arriaga's trips, her clothes and mansions, as well as her role during the Resistance, remind one of movies filmed in those times.

<sup>6</sup> Marvel Moreno's narrative proposes to recuperate and accept "the black values that mark the popular *costeña* culture".- Gilard Jacques, *Ser escritora en Colombia, Femmes des Amériques*, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, p. 228

<sup>7</sup> Phaf Ineke, *El amor, la herencia cultural y el estado nacional en la literatura caribeña*, Actas del 3er Congreso de AELSAL, Neuchâtel, 1986, p.132.

<sup>8</sup> Interview granted to Jacques Gilard, *El Espectador, Magazin Dominical*, Bogotá, November 8th, 1981, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner George, "The Distribution of Discourse", in *On Difficulty and other essays*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p.85

<sup>10</sup> She says so in an interview granted to Julio Olaciregui, *El Espectador, Magazin Dominical*, Bogotá, 1985, (we do not remember the exact date).