

## A Tale of Resistance in Latin America

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Latin American women writers through their narratives have triumphantly shown their resistance against the oppressive forces- patriarchy and the State, mainly. Most of the post modern women writers, in spite of belonging to the literary group of the Boom phase, have been pushed to the periphery. The centre stage has been occupied by the four prominent male fiction authors considered to be the pillar of the Boom: Julio Cortazar (1914-84), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014), Carlos Fuentes Macias (1928-2012) and Mario Varghas Llosa (1936). However, there are authors like Roserio Castellanos (1925- 1974) who perhaps would have eased the tension shown by Dorris Sommer regarding the fading essence of the representative narratives. Castellanos is one of those rare Latin American authors from Mexico who would allow the subalterns of Mexico to speak, in her texts, for instance, *The Book of Lamentations* (1963), based on her childhood memories with the special care of not usurping the latter's voice with her narratives filled with nostalgia. Though her narrative is not morally didactic aimed at the building of an ideal nation yet her theme marks a critical and feminine entry into the group of Boom writers.

Clarice Lispector (1920- 1977) is another LA author from Brazil offering a critique on the wide spread apathy shown for the community of migrated people and the act of forced migration from periphery to the centre of Brazil. This focus on the daily mundane life of an individual is exclusive to Lispector's work, *The Hour of the Star* (1977). This text also represents some of the feature of *Vanguardia* (avant-garde) theme of modern existence heightened by the text's urban setting. Lispector, unlike writers like Maria Luisa Bombal<sup>1</sup> (1910- 80), does not present reality of existence in the metaphorical disguise. She rather presents an upfront narrative of the life in Brazil with jarring experiences raising the emotions of disgust because of its real encounters. This paper aims at

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<sup>1</sup> Ace figure noted by Swanson, in Latin American literature incorporating avant-garde themes.

exploring the text *The Lizard's Tail* (1983) by Luisa Valenzuela (1938), an Argentinian famous novelist, short story writer and journalist. She has been eulogized by many critics for their seminal contribution in raising the feminine voice. She is another bold figure belonging to the group of Latin American women author emerged in the Post Boom phase. Some of her famous works are *Hey Que Sonrier (You Have to Smile)* 1966, *Cambio de Armas (A Change of Weapons)* 1982, and *El Señor de Tecuru (The Lizards Tail)* 1983. Valenzuela took recourse to writing to resist the oppressive forces. *The Lizard's Tail* is invested with a metaphorical detailed account of Lopez Rega and his evil perversions. She presents an extensive critique of the politics and dictatorship with the underpinning mention of the sexuality and women exploitation. Valenzuela yet manages to secure herself a renowned position in comparison to Castellanos and Lispector. This perhaps could be because of her writings produced in the era after the Boom. In an interview given to Robert Dash acknowledge this privilege to the feminist movements. According to her, it was because of the possession by Boom writers that women writers were completely omitted from the scene. Commenting on the rigid patriarchal system prevailing in the field of literature too, Valenzuela admits that "many times we speak and we have the feeling that we are speaking to a void" (Interview, 102). Therefore, her belonging to the successive period helps in changing the paradigms.

Latin American literature is fairly adhered to its political context and cultural roots. Most of the Latin American writers stick to the technique of Magic Realism as a narrative mechanism to present their socio-cultural scenario. One such great example is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) authored by the doyen of Latin American Literature i.e. Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It is through the ink of magic realism that Marquez attempts to pen down his childhood experiences of the political upheaval in Aracataca, Mocondo in fiction, majorly dominated by Civil War and Banana Plantations. Love is another subject for which Marquez exploits this technique of merging fantasy into real. *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994) by the same author contains the agonies in love caused due to the exorcism performed by the religion, State and superstitions. However, the

use of magic realism is employed to accelerate the story plot and to further intensify the superstitious beliefs and cultural images be it a political narrative or the one dealing with love. If one dares to question his narrative critically, in spite of the brilliance achieved in the employment of magic realism, Marquez fails to provide insights into the characters. In other words, his nostalgic narrative or flowery prose takes away all the attentions leaving less for the character development. However, women writers of Latin America have provided the insight into the characters.

The Post Boom was notable for its political and social exposition. It definitely produced some newness but could not break free from its past completely. For instance, the political allegory was very much a part of the Boom but which continued in the Post Boom too. The main feature of the Post Boom was its ability to question the reality through a radical approach. It is although different from the conventional representation of reality because of its radical usage of ambiguous imagery intertwined with fantasies and myths to discourse the same. Shaw in his detailed analysis of the period opines that there is one more feature of the Post Boom which is its "social commitment" (13). Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), as Shaw observes, does present a socio-political critique with the mention of Banana plantations and other wars but the characters themselves fail to cast a critical glance on it because of the town had been wrought with the plague of amnesia. Texts like *The Lizards' Tail*, on the other hand, offer a critical perspective of its characters upon the ongoing social upheaval caused by the rulers. This text which is a Post Boom product, along with the theme of politics and sexuality ingeniously represents the established relationship between a literary fiction and 'I' of an author. The text exemplifies an anti-realist stance with the combining aspect of the Post Boom feature mentioned above. It presents the language which is arbitrary, the content that is incomprehensible yet the episode and reality which relates it to the Argentinian political and cultural context. The novel gains success in terms of its totalizing representation of brutality and oppression.

It is, however, surprising to note that the authors like Valenzuela, Lispector or Castellanos has broken free from fetters of the influence of their belongingness to a specific period. The chief challenge, therefore, while mapping down the course of narratives by such authors is the difficulty of using their texts as a model writing of the Boom and the Post Boom. Latin American literature has been widely dominated by its male authors and the resistance to characterize themselves to one particular era, these three women authors in a way have posited a challenge to their authority. Luisa Valenzuela has contemplated her writings as a resistance to passiveness. Her political work brings forth the awareness of the oppression which marks a special distinction with the other writers of the same oeuvre. What is, therefore, different in works like *Lamentations* and *Lizard's Tail* is political matters are presented with the collaboration of both home and the world, that it brings together the internal commotion and external violence. Luisa Valenzuela's outright critique of the contemporary political figure in *The Lizard's Tale*, 1983 won her position of an outstanding and a true representative of Latin American fiction. Carlos Fuentes lionized her keeping in mind the position of a woman author: "She wears an opulent, baroque crown, but her feet are naked" (Vallejo, 145). *The Lizard's Tail* is a biography of the most notorious figure of a Latin American torturer, Lopez Rega. He was the minister of social welfare, 1973-75, in Argentina under the presidency of Isabel Peron and said to have practiced sorcery and witchcraft in his lust for power to remain at his position and become omnipotent.

Valenzuela in an interview with Robert Dash elucidate that "power is a form of sexual perversion" (103), that sexual dominance can persuade the maddening sense of being an absolute monarchy. The text *The Lizard's Tail* is replete with such sexual imagery which unveils the evil means of achieving the political success of Manuel- the one born out of his own sperm (referring to Lopez Rega). Irving Howe's theorize this manner of addressing a political paradigm in his *Politics and the Novel* (1957). He compares a political novelist with a dialectician and emphasizes that the novelist must think of the way where "the ideas in the novel are transformed into something other than the ideas

of a political program" (21). Here in the present text sexual perversion becomes this transformed idea: "He smeared Madam President with his seed so she would always remember that the power she held over her people was actually a power that came from him, her Master" (Valenzuela, 25). It is important to note that the text is a fictionalized biography which means it definitely recounts Lopez Rega's role as a minister but the language used is filled with elements of magic realism. However, the accounts of sorcery and the lust for power give a reality effect to this fiction. *The Lizard's Tail* falls under the genre of the *dictator novel*<sup>2</sup> which also marks the culmination of the Boom. The prominent examples of the dictator novel other than the present text are Alejo Carpentier's *Reason of the State* (1974) and Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975). The genre's validity is evident from the title, *The Lizard's Tail*. A whip thus was an instrument of torture during Jose Lopez Rega's malevolent reign.

Valenzuela without any hesitation confesses that the monarch in the text with Jose Lopez Rega in interviews and discussions, yet the reality presented in the form of fiction. Hence, the act of writing a biography which looks as if a fiction is a real challenge in front of an artist especially those hailing from Latin America with the label of representational writers. Valenzuela has only "extrapolated"<sup>3</sup> the historical moments in the text, for instance, attempt at resurrection of the "dead woman" in the text which was Evita Peron, second wife of the President Juan Peron, in real, 1974<sup>4</sup>. Yet the one question which strikes the audience's mind is why then the mode of fiction? The reason to this is best explained by Roland Barthes in his theory on *The Reality Effect*<sup>5</sup>. Barthes

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<sup>2</sup> Critics like Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria and Gerald Martin acknowledge this genre as based on the indigenous themes of Latin America. [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dictator\\_novel](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dictator_novel)

<sup>3</sup> As explained in the interview given to Evelyn Picon Garfield.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/12/obituaries/jose-lopez-rega-72-a-backstage-power-in-the-peron-regime.html>

<sup>5</sup> Barthes theorize in his essay the significance of the real details in historical narratives focusing majorly on Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*, The episode where in the description of a landscape painting take place but the details are concrete, of Roenun city. Though *The*

believes that naked and simple representation of reality renders a text a meaningless form. In the absence of the writer's aestheticization and its interpolation of language, such texts would appear like reportage. For instance, following episode from *History of France*<sup>6</sup>, 1855 by Jules Michelet is of consideration. The text was notable for introducing as well as defining the term *Renaissance* for the first time in literature<sup>7</sup> as the author aimed to break away from the cultural history of Europe and foster the need to sense the human understanding through art in the modern world. The episode describing the arrival of the executioner of Charlotte Corday's<sup>8</sup> after the painter, explains well the tenuous balance of facts and fiction: "after an hour and a half, there was a gentle knock at a little door behind her" (Barthes, 141). The information could have easily been supplied without the "superfluous" details like the size of the door, gentle knocking or the time gap between the arrival of the painter and the executioner. However, the 'symbolic value' which these details carry adds another dimension to the narrative which not only solicits the meaning of the narrative but also connects the reader with the author's purpose of writing. For instance, *The Lizard's Tail* offers the description of the act of resurrecting the Dead Woman from her coffin: "cutting through the glass took more than two hours because it was a task that called for the precision of a surgeon and the love of a mother" (Valenzuela, 81).

*The Lizard's Tail* is not a testimonial text<sup>9</sup> unlike Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School*, 1986 which is drafted after her own experience as a political activist and a prisoner in Argentina. *The Lizard's Tail* is more adhered to what Castellanos has done in *The Book of Lamentations* that is resistance to the militant regime. The dissemination of the

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*Lizard's Tail* is not a historical novel but a text-laden with political matters of contemporary Argentina, yet Barthes theory is inevitable because it stresses on the writer's arduous work on language.

<sup>6</sup> Originally written in French with the title, *Histoire de France*.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/j/johnson-renaissance.html>

<sup>8</sup> French revolutionary

<sup>9</sup> In fact, when Valenzuela was writing the text she was not living in Argentina but in the United States.

cognizance of the oppressiveness of the authority, through the medium of their text, is the first step to resistance. *The Lizard's Tail* is a cogent critique of power structures established by the patriarchal units of the society. The text also explains the political turmoil and dictatorship through the themes of sexuality and gender equations which shall be dealt here with in other chapters. So powerful the protagonist's role is that the author had to jump in the text and surrender herself: "I, Luisa Valenzuela, swear by these writings that I will try to do something about all this... plunge in head first, aware of how little can be done but with a desire to handle at least a small thread and assume responsibility of the story" (125). Therefore, Valenzuela admits that the only way to curb this madman's evilness is to omit her from the text only then she would be able to eliminate this potent character from its existence. The technique, hence, is first to expose the dubious state of the protagonist and then refuse to be an alibi by sharing the same text and thus, put an end to his existence (authorities'): "By erasing myself from the map, I intend to erase you. Without my biography, it will be as if you had never had a life. So long, Sorcerer, *felice morte*" (227). This in itself is one of the crucial examples of how power regime dominates. Valenzuela's this kind of intervention also highlights the importance of avant-garde writers like her and the power which their pen possess. A political repression in the shape of sexual torture is permeated in the text: "Naked, the maidens howled under the blows (of the whip) and I recorded those howls." The protagonist would listen to the recorded sounds which gives him pleasure and contentment of being the macho. When the maidens would hear their own howling, they would be reminded of their subjection to him. He would also play the indiscreet audio for the visitors to let them know of his potential. Valenzuela through such gruesome images also tries to depict a harsh reality of Hispanic sexist world along with military dictatorship. It seems it has been an indispensable topic of Valenzuela's writing because something similar is being written in *Cambios de armas* (A Change of Weapons), 1982. In the text, the dictator's bedroom ceiling is filled with mosaic of mirrors under which he sexually abused women. The idea was to acquaint those women of their identity reduced to the objects for sexual pleasure when they see their identity

constructed by the perpetrator through their own eyes (through the mirror). This reverberates Lacan's idea of identity that you see yourself as what other thinks you are. Therefore, Luisa Valenzuela's political discourse is also a matter of feminist concerns. This distinct aspect of political understanding where an individual's, the matter is worse when it is a woman, faith in his own existence is shaken, where the sexual domination becomes a dangerous supplement<sup>10</sup> for the power politics helps Valenzuela in standing out from the political discourses of other male writers like Cortazar, Fuentes and Marquez. *The Lizard's Tail* main motive is to urge people to break the silence and begin resisting the sadistic authorities. Valenzuela in the similar hope exercise her power of being the author and deprive the Sorcerer of his masculinity by castrating him in the end just when he was about to produce a son like him. Hence, the prophecy made in the epigraph that a river of blood will flow is proven to be true but in the case of the author not the Sorcerer's who interpreted it to be a song of his triumph of tortures. This metaphorically guides the audience of Argentina to act against the authority before it multiplies. The political concerns in the *The Lizard's Tail* are painted with the colour of myths, superstition and folklore which leaves the scent of belongingness, the sense of being a true Latin American on the canvas of the postmodern world.

Jacques Lacan, the doyen of psychoanalysis, explains the establishment of sexual identity through the figurative use of language. As it is language in his viewpoint which forms a strong influence on the culture and society within which it is employed. French philosopher Michel Foucault, on the other hand, makes a literal commentary on the same carnal theme. Both the theorists have managed to explain the implication of this theme as an example of the master-slave relationship which *The Liard's Tail* exalts thoroughly. The active-passive partners during a sexual intercourse as parallel to the

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<sup>10</sup> The term has been borrowed from one of deconstruction theory by Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* and is implied here loosely. Derrida developed the theory to analyze the relationship between writing and language. He refers to supplement as something which not only fills in the void but also replaces the primary, for instance writing replacing the speech. The sense of superiority is achieved fully through the act of sexual dominance.

domination by the men in power like *The Sorcerer* or the arbitrary police force and their subjects of subordination. It is interesting to note that the orientation of the Sorcerer is shown to be pansexual which points out, metaphorically though, a free access to channelize his tyranny to any place. This in return gives him a supreme sense of an omnipotent ruler. The text, in the degree of active-passive relationship between the master and the slave places emphasis on the patterns of social as well as sexual domination which, therefore, brings attention towards two major issues to fight with. These issues are the abuses against women, considered outside body politic, occupying the subordinate position as an 'other' and the silence of the masses against their oppressive authorities.

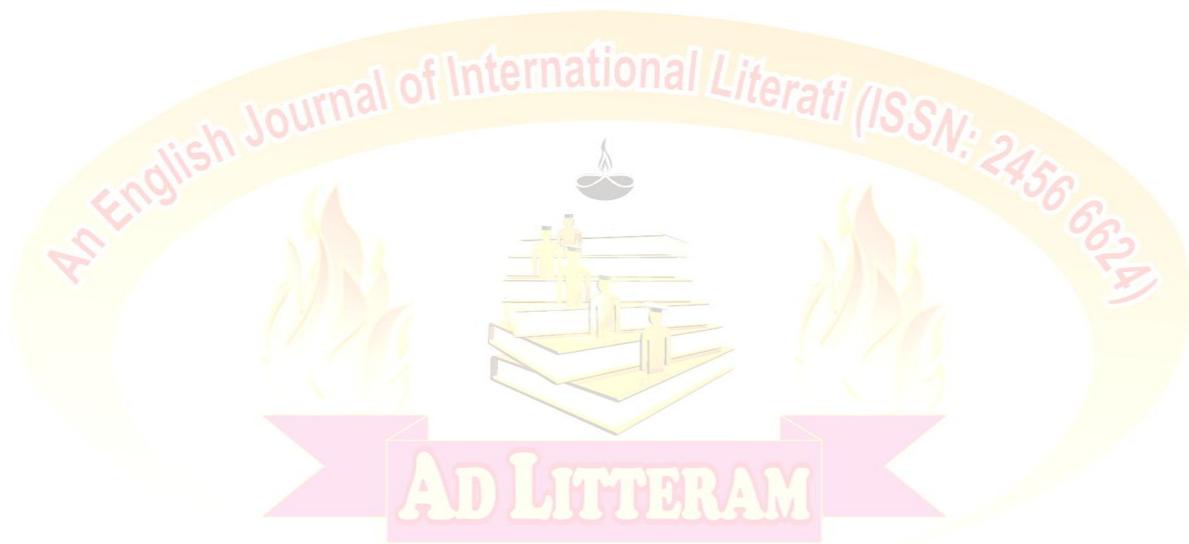
The manner in which the authorities treat the subject of sexuality forms a part of the culture structuring the society. This idea which is loosely adapted from Michel Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' stands true within the Latin American context. The text exploiting its theme of sexuality does not limit its exploration only to the brutality meted out for salacious advances. It also explores the inhumane bodily tortures women were subjugated to which was a constant reminder of male supremacy over them. The Sorcerer experiments his magical potions on Indian maiden, the two words in it suggests the dual obligation of their silent submission. This expedient formula would make the sexual assault of women easier without making their bellies swell either by him or by other members of the repressive regime: "sometimes he even allows emissaries from the central government... (to) have some fun fertilizing the maidens" (23). A bold critique offered on the complicit nature of the State. Valenzuela, like Castellanos, astutely helps presents the silent cries of the Indian women, doubly oppressed and reduced to the significance of an inanimate being. The magical formula episode is the one of the boldest satire to be made in the text. The sorcerer as the embodiment of the authorities was perhaps afraid of the progeny as the offspring might claim his crowned position or stand against his demonic and perverse empire. Therefore, he concocts a formula to be injected through vagina which would dissolve

the uterus, erasing every possibility of conceiving. The only offspring, however, he is willing to welcome in his domain would be another Six fingers (the name given to one of his triple testicles) like him. The other kinds of normal babies turned into dishes to be served on his plate. This grotesque scene presents the limit up to which a tyrant can go to claim his control over "lives and properties" (22).

The text offers a digressive form of love as opposed to the conventional courtly or conjugal love. In the first instance, Love in the form of voluntary separation between Luisa Valenzuela and Navoni and secondly, through the other kind of love in too much of attachment i.e. narcissistic love of the Sorcerer. The only thing other than himself being loved by him is Sixfingers, referred to as "first Love" (23) and Estrella (one of the three testicles), the "great love" (23). And the only person he holds in "veneration" (23) is the Dead Woman. The tyrant feels content in the presence of these three love and he, therefore, "renounce sex" (24) proclaiming himself to be a "built-in woman" (24). Sadly, this self-sufficient claim fails to stop the abuse of the maiden through his whip for entertainment as well as for sadistic pleasures. In the end, Valenzuela castrates the Sorcerer asserting her identity as an author. This act of castration is vindictive of bringing down the fortress of male supremacy protected with the walls of pre set notion of sexuality. His omnisexuality covers him under the false notion of an absolute monarch and castration devoid him of this position.

The Lizard's Tail emphasizes upon the aphrodisiac nature of the power through the figure of the Sorcerer. The power turns him into a sexual maniac and vice versa. However, the term sexual is again problematic in his context. Luisa Valenzuela poignantly asserts the politics of the body played out through the whip of the power. Valenzuela interpolation of herself in the text and taking the responsibility to terminate the torture allied her to recreate the language of political allegory in the context of Latin America. It is, therefore, through her narrative that Valenzuela challenges the position of the patriarchal figures like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his texts as a "symbolic

distillation”<sup>11</sup> of the Latin American history and politics. It is through the language of politics and sexuality that Valenzuela has tried to inscribe the feminine perspective in the world of Latin American literature. Her consciousness to the subjugated subjects and voicing it in a subdued manner extols her writer par excellence. The title, *The Lizard's Tail*, is suggestive of the regeneration of the power regime like a lizard grows back its tail and hence a word of caution by the author for the next generation. However, the episode of castration in the text suggests the necessary actions to be taken by the oppressed mass and deprive the authorities of the power.



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<sup>11</sup> A term borrowed from an interview taken by Gonzalez Bermejo on the discussion of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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