Don Quijote
y la
crítica literaria contemporánea
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THE AGENCY OF MUSLIM WOMEN  
IN THE NARRATIVE OF CERVANTES

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Muslim women in Cervantes' drama and narrative are strikingly different from Christian women. This has been described as a kind of Orientalism, the posing of stark dichotomies as the Arab women who fall in love with their Christian slaves are seen to be sensuous and lustful in contrast to the pure and virtuous Christian maidens (Casalduero, 1951: 237). Even where they might be considered admiringly "varonil", their precipitate actions and character are said to compare unfavorably with the Christians. In El gallardo español the Muslim princess Arlaxa whose territory is close to the presidio of Oran gets so carried away with the stories that her Christian captive has told her about the valor of Don Fernando an officer from the Spanish side that she resolves to meet him, completely inappropriate though it might be. As she tells Oropesa

Las alabanzas extrañas  
que aplicaste a aquel Fernando,  
contándome sus hazañas,  
se me fueron estampando  
en medio de las entrañas,  
y de allí nació un deseo  
nos lascivo, torpe o feo,  
aunque vano por curioso,  
de ver un hombre famoso  
más de los que siempre veo. (Cervantes, 1962: 193)

Undeterred by the warnings of the men around her about the foolhardiness of her venture she exclaims:

Yo tengo un alma bizarra  
y varonil, de tal suerte,
que gusto del que desgarga
y mas alla de la muerte
tira atrevido la barra.

Later on in the play she is unable to sustain her varonilidad as Melveena Kckendrick has shown and Doña Margarita, Don Fernando’s true love emerges as the stronger of the two (McKendrick, 1974: 80). Joaquin Casalduero attributes this to a good Christian upbringing (Casalduero, 1951: 42).

However it can also be ventured that it is Arlaxa’s unconventionality that makes the figure of Doña Margarita who has escaped an imperious brother and donned masculine garb to pursue the man of her dreams more acceptable to the audience. Arlaxa who first challenges a patriarchal order thus makes Doña Margarita’s “anti social” role playing possible. Arlaxa’s later weakness and fragility when faced with real turns of fortune in contrast to Doña Margarita’s vaunted fortitude have much to with the contingencies of the moment and the alliances she can muster up when attacked (she appeals for help to the kings of Cuco and Alabez because she knows she can depend on their support) and not with any essential character traits.

There are many kinds of Muslim women that populate the works of Cervantes and what sets them apart is their self possession and strong desire to step outside the boundaries of the known. They deliberately challenge their husbands and fathers and seem to be quite free from cultural and religious limitations. It has to be sufficiently appreciated as María Antonia García has pointed out that according to the laws in the Algiers of Cervantes’ time these women could be as severely punished as captive Christian men for adultery (García, 2002: 166-169). In Los Tratos de Argel, the wealthy and beautiful Zahara who feels out of love with her husband the renegade Yzuf pursues her Christian slave Aurelio and plaintively acknowledges her passion to her maid Silvia:

Este cristiano, Silvia, este cristiano,
este cristiano es, Silvia, quien me tiene
fuera del ser que a moras es debido,
fuera de mi contento y alegria,
fuera de todo gusto y estoy fuera,
que es lo peor, de todo mi sentido. (Cervantes, 1962: 127)

Despite her entreaties, Aurelio is tempted but finally unwilling because of a prior commitment to Silvia and the fear of God and the authorities. He warns her that he is doing her a favour by staying away from her (“Antes te hago favor, si con el compás de honor lo compases y lo mides, ¿No miras que soy cristiano con suerte y desdicha mala?”) and also that she is going against her own faith in pursuing him thus (“La ofensas que, siendo mora, a Mahoma viene a hacer”) (Cervantes, 1962:114-115). But nevertheless Zahara’s words “Dejame a mi con Mahoma que ahora soy sierva del amor” show her willingness to run risks despite her religion. Zahara’s refusal to go along with her fate is in line with the rebellious women described by Gayle Rubin who break rigid kinship structures. Rubin’s essay on the bewildering rules that women have to negotiate in different cultures highlights how often taken for granted phenomena in some societies are fraught with danger in others and thus call for unconformism and courage on the part of those who would go their own way. Seen in this light, Zahara’s actions are subversive and cannot be dismissed as merely whimsical and self indulgent. As Rubin reminds us:

If a girl is promised in infancy her refusal to participate as an adult would disrupt the flow of debts and promises. It would be in the interests of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others rather than one which actively desired and sought a response (Rubin, 1998: 547).

Zahara who is risking much in trying to escape a loveless marriage might have struck a sympathetic chord in sections of the audience. Cervantes who had spent five years in Algiers could not have been unaware of the implications of the actions of his Muslim protagonist. Américo Castro has remarked that though Cervantes might have considered Catholic marriage as sacred, a sacrament that only death could undo, yet he put the blame squarely on men in cases of adultery (Castro, 1980: 367-368). Zahara’s husband Yzuf is shiftless and lazy and her move towards Aurelio though hopeless demonstrates her frustration rather than vileness. There is speculation whether Cervantes had actually read Erasmus but the latter’s embryonic feminist ideas on female education were in currency in Spain (Bataillon, 1985: 777-801). The pathetic lot of women in both civilizations could not have escaped Cervantes and for this reason it seems unlikely that he would neatly dichotomize in his portrayal of Christian and Muslim women. Instead of viewing Christian morality as a premiss for analysing Cervantes’ Moorish heroines, I would like to suggest as Jonathan Thacker has done in his Role Play and World as Stage
in the Comedia for Christian heroines in the theatre of Lope,1 that the various kinds of roles that these women play in order to flee their circumstances (conversas, lovers of Christian captives, lovers of learning) give the audience ideas about different ways of undermining traditional institutions.

In Los baños de Argel, and Don Quixote the plucky Zahara and Zoraida get their way and manage to hoodwink their families and escape the arranged marriages that await them. Both self assuredly make elaborate plans with much confidence in the outcome and do not appear to have been driven to take this step out of desperation. Zahara after having made up her mind about Don Lope makes discrete enquiries about Christian men from Don Fernando.

Ven acá: dime, cristiano: ¿en tu tierra hay quien prometa y no cumpla?... ¿Aunque dé en parte secreta su fe, su palabra y mano? (Cervantes, 1962: 290)

Her kinswoman Halima describes Zahara as “una gran amiga del saber” when she notices her talking with the Christians. The latter is the wife of Caurali the corsair and she tries to put her Christian captives at ease in the company of Muslim women saying that they have nothing to fear because no Muslim woman would deceive her man. This is obviously not the case but these conversations are indicative not of the wantonness of Muslim women but of the normal conviviality that ensues when people are thrown together, something that official discourse did not admit as possible and happening.2 Halima’s world view is emotionally inclusive, the foreign is welcomed and the known and quotidian is considered prosaic and constraining, a characteristic of the cosmopolitan sensibility. Much of the drama in these plays revolves around the efforts of these women to evade the control that fathers, husbands and would be suitors exercise over their lives.

1 “The theatre presents the spectator with a variety of roles which can be imitated or rejected (may even be intended to be imitated or rejected in didactic theatre), which may well be institutionally marked, but which are, above all, available, possible” (Thacker, 2002: 10).

2 “Los amores entre árabes y cristianos, entre amos y esclavos, tan recurrentes en las comedias turcas de servidumbres, ponen de manifiesto algo que la Españina inquisitorial pretende ignorar: la convivencia pacífica de estas comunidades” (Maestro, 2003: 30).

He seems beholden to Zahara and she emerges less a temptress than a saviour. In fact, in Los baños it is the Christian man Don Fernando who opportunistically plays on Halima’s attraction to him and makes good his escape with Zahara and Don Lope. On the other hand if the Zahara of Los tratos is driven purely by passion with little planning and foresight, Zoraida / Zahara in Don Quixote and Los baños have more concrete strategies. The first one tells the Captive that if he is not inclined to marry her, Lela Marjen will manage to find her another husband in Spain. These women continually resist the constraints and securities of home. Zoraida, in “La historia del cautivo” revolts against a father and parental culture. She attributes it all to her desire to become a Christian inculcated by her maid. But Zoraida’s motives are a little suspect, not least because her treatment of her father who she wilfully deceives over a period of time is cruel and un-Christian like. In fact critics have pointed out how Zoraida’s story of wanting to convert is constructed by Ruy Perez (Garrett, 2000: 133-156) who realizes he has to make the exotic figure of Zoraida acceptable to his Christian listeners gathered in Juan Palomeque’s inn. Dorotea’s brusque question “Tell me Señor, is this lady a Christian or a Moor?
Her dress and her silence make us think she is what we would rather she was not” (Cervantes, 2003: 327) compels him to make his story heartwarming, and portray Zoraida as a potential Christian. But what is more plausible than Zoraida’s wanting to be a conversa is her simple longing for the new and for adventure. Agi Morato hints that this when he says she is escaping because she feels life will be more permissive in Spain. Zoraida’s situation in life is not so desperate as to warrant such premeditated flight but we underestimate the gap between the aspirations that have been awakened in elite women like Zoraida and cities like Algiers which might have had an outward sheen due to economic prosperity but lack the infrastructure to sustain cultural life. Though a hedonistic society the corruption and prostitution characteristic of any society in flux left little room for the illusion of romance. Hence these women of the elite class look beyond their shores. As Dan Eisenberg has surmised, Cervantes probably also left Algiers due to this reason where he could have hoped to occupy a position of eminence had he reneged to the Muslim faith. For women the reality of Algiers concludes Eisenberg must have been even harsher (Eisenberg, 1999: 241-253). The man from abroad in both cases is fascinating because of his novelty and Zoraida / Zahara face opposition which they impatiently dismiss. This appeal of the foreign in contrast to what is at home can be interpreted as similar to the regime of representations and attitudes that constitute Orientalism but the kind of intimacy and identification that Cervantes’ protagonists demonstrate precludes this. In Los tratos, Zahara tries to befriend Silvia in order to confide in her and refers to their common fate as women

Cristina di: ¿de dónde eres?
¿Eres pobre o eres rica?
¿De suerte enalzada, o chica?
No me lo niegues, si quieres,
porque soy, cual tú, mujer,
y no de entrañas tan duras
que tus tristes desventuras
no me hayan de enterar.” (Cervantes, 1962: 126)

In Los baños there is a considerable degree of amicability amongst the women Halima, Constanza, Zahara albeit at times under false pretences because Halima does not know that she and Constanza are interested in the same man. She also asks the latter to intercede on her behalf to Don Fernando letting him know of her affection for him.

The attitudes of these women are plausible and representative of strands of public opinion and not just a device used by Cervantes to exalt the Christian civilization. Though these women do not know that they wish to escape from one patriarchal system to another, their strong desire to move away from sheltered, class bound and thus constraining lives is due to the influences they chance to get in the prevailing cosmopolitan atmosphere of cities like Algiers, Fez and Tunis which are pullulating with thousands of corsairs, renegades, captives and merchants from all over Europe who have left feudal economies, lured by the easy wealth to be made here.3 In El gallardo español, the motives of the Christian woman Doña Margarita who is disguised as a soldier and arrives in Oran looking for Don Fernando are thus described by the latter “...Quizá la vida le enfade soldadesca y desgarrada, y como el vicio le doma, viene tras la de Mahoma, que es más ancha y regalada”. The curiosity about the Other is reciprocal in Christian and Muslim territories. Historians have remarked on the richness of these exchanges that took place in spite of the polarized official atmosphere.4 Cervantes’ characters are in tune with the times and his Muslim heroines go the extra mile in “transcending the pettiness of mere existence”5 in the evocative words of Canavaggio to forge a rapport with the strangers in their midst.


4 Fernand Braudel (1975: 759) “Between the two enemy religions, it would be unrealistic to imagine a watertight barrier. Men passed to and fro, indifferent to frontiers, states and creeds. They were more aware of the necessities of shipping and trade, the hazards of war and piracy, the opportunities for complicity or betrayal provided by circumstances”.

5 Jean Canavaggio (1977: 353) “Exceptionnels, les héros de Los Tratos de Argel, de Los Baños de Argel, de La Gran Sultan ne le sont donc plus du fait de leur
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naissance, de leur condition ou de l’enjeu qu’ils se sont assigné; leur démesure, au sens littéral du terme, s’exprime dans un projet d’existence qui les arrache aux mesquineries et aux défaillances du quotidien, dans un dépassement vers un nouvel ordre du monde, celui de la transcendance".