East and West
Exploring Cultural Manifestations

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Friendship and Politics in the Work of Cervantes and Lope de Vega

Minni Sawhney

In the captivity plays *Los Baños de Argel* and *Los Tratos de Argel* that Cervantes wrote after his return from Algiers, interspersed with descriptions of life in the city in the household of slave owner couples and the misery of Christian slaves, are conversations that evolve into surprising friendships between Christian captives and their Muslim slave owners. These interactions are brief, but intense, marked by love, attraction and sympathy and sometimes the inevitable repudiation at the end. Nevertheless, their existence makes them a counter to the scenes of cruelty and polarizations, that according to critics, give testimony of Cervantes’ years in captivity and are the raison d’être of this production.

These encounters have sometimes been overlooked, or interpreted negatively by critics, because they do not fit into a paradigm of trauma and suffering and irreconcilable antagonism between the Ottoman Empire and that of Philip II. Critics as diverse as Joaquín Casalduero, who wrote *Sentido y forma en el teatro de Cervantes* in 1951 and María Antonia Garcés who wrote on the life of Cervantes in Algiers in 2002, have highlighted what seem to them the
dichotomies inherent in the oeuvre of Cervantes during this period. For example, in his analysis of *Los Tratos de Argel*, Casalduero compares the love that Zahara the Muslim landlady professes for her Christian slave Aurelio and that of the latter for Silvia his true love who is also a Christian captive in the same house, as a case of two kinds of love characteristic of two civilizations.¹

However, Jean Canavaggio, the biographer of Cervantes, has sidestepped these binary oppositions. In his doctoral thesis on Cervantes’ theatre, *Cervantès dramaturge: un théâtre à naître*, he wrote about a dramatic space in Cervantes’ plays, separate from geographic space, and the special relation that existed between Cervantine drama and history. The latter, was not just a material reality to be incorporated or excluded, but something that manifested its contradictions because it was expressed in multiple language forms and speech acts through dialogues between protagonists.² According to Canavaggio, whether the plays were set in a concrete place like Algiers or Oran or Seville or in an imaginary one like a palace or forest, the action of the comedies did not take place with exclusive reference to this place. An extra scenic space came about that language invented. Dialogue and actions amongst protagonists created this space. The protagonists did not have psychological essences to reveal nor fixed identities – the latter evolved through their interactions with others.³

My endeavour in this paper will be to show how language and the conversations between protagonists of the Muslim and Christian faiths liberate the dramatic space from fixed polarizations and dichotomies and there opens up a space of cohabitation and understanding. These are a result of the somewhat ephemeral friendships which give a new
dimension to politics. As Fernand Braudel has averred:

War is not the antithesis of civilization and although the Mediterranean might have become a conflictual zone between the East and the West, the barriers were never so impermeable as to inhibit contact between the two sides. The need for trade and opportunities for complicity and betrayal made contact between people inevitable.\(^4\)

Thus, friendship though an apparently marginal concept affects politics as well as being managed and constrained by it. If heretofore, critics have concentrated on the differences between two civilizations and the reflection of this in literature, it is also imperative to show representations of hospitality in these texts when foreigners and strangers become friends and companions. In *Los Tratos*, the Christians and Moors forge bonds despite the fraught situation and enter into relations that the Spanish Inquisition would consider ‘antistatutory’ in the view of Jean Canavaggio.\(^5\) The couple Yzuf and Zahara fall in love with their Christian slaves Aurelio and Silvia who unbeknownst to them are also a couple in love. Despite the obvious unequal power relation and the star-crossed loves, the Muslim slave owners soften towards their Christian servants due to the obligatory cohabitation. While it is difficult to term the treatment of their slaves as hospitality, since both couples feel a natural inhibition towards the foreign and unfamiliar, yet in their hesitant advances we sense a curiosity for the Other. The Muslim lady of the house Zahara questions her maid Silvia;
Cristiana di de donde eres?
¿Eres pobre o eres rica?
De suerte ensalzada o chica
No me lo niegues si quieres
Porque soy cual tu mujer
Y no de entrañas tan duras
Que tus tristes desventuras
No me hayan de enternecer. (126)

[Christian girl tell me where you are from
Are you rich or poor?
Has life treated you well or badly?
Do not deny me
Because I am a woman like you
And not so hard so as to be unmoved
By your feelings.]

Zahara mentions her own anguish because Aurelio does not reciprocate her feelings and asks Silvia «¿Y es pecado querer bien a un moro?» ([Is it a sin to love a Moor?]) To which Silvia replies:

Yo no sé nada
Sé que es cosa reprobada
Y a cristianos no está bien.

[I don’t know
I know that it is forbidden]
And not good for Christians.]

Zahara continues:
«¿Y querer mora a cristiano?»

[And for a Moorish woman to love a Christian man?]

Silvia: «Eso tu mejor lo entiendes». (127)

[You know this best yourself.]

What emerges from this conversation between these two women of different religions and cultures, is Zahara’s desire to get to know Silvia better and to be privy to her dreams and secrets. However, as Silvia’s answer to Zahara makes clear, their intimacy has not led to agreement. It is possible to be involved with the customs of other societies without approving or adopting them. At the end of the play the slave owner couple Yzuf and Zahara realize they have been duped and react in a hostile manner. Like in any human relationship there exists here a fascination and then a repudiation but at the end when the slaves return to Spain, they feel grateful that they have had better luck at the hands of their owners than they bargained for. When she confesses her love for Aurelio, Zahara brings to full view the narrowness of her horizons and her longing to escape the ‘tyranny of identity’ that is her fate. She is not resigned to a marriage with the opportunistic and lazy Yzuf. She hopes her transgressive love for Aurelio will help her escape the prison of a fixed identity.

Between Yzuf and Aurelio, a curious relationship
develops and Aurelio advises Yzuf on his love life. Aurelio promises to help him because he is Yzuf’s slave but also because he feels a kinship for a brother for whom, «melindres de mujeres te tengan de aquesa suerte». (121) [the whims of women have brought him to this impasse]. Yzuf rewards him and offers to free him for the «del contento que me has dado» [for the happiness he has brought him].

To view these relations as good or bad and right or wrong is to ignore the complications of particular social contexts and historical situations. The struggle is not always to agree with the interlocutor as in the case of Aurelio and Yzuf or in the conversation between the two women but to understand. On their part, as proof that fraternal feeling with its inherent constraints emanates not just from the side of the Muslims, Aurelio and Silvia take pity on their owners because they are unable to return their love. Silvia comments on the declarations of love made by her mistress Zahara for Aurelio.

Todo ese cuento ya me ha dicho Zahara
Y me ha pedido que yo a ti te pida
No quieras desdenarla así a la clara.
También no pasa menos triste vida
Yzuf, nuestro amo que también me adora,
Con fe que, a lo que creo no es fingida. (132)

[Zahara has told me the whole story
and has asked me to tell you not to disdain her
She is also going through a sad time
Yzuf our owner also adores me
With a faith that I don't think is feigned.

Cervantes’ protagonists have been considered exceptional by the critic Jean Canavaggio, not due to reasons of their birth, or social standing or even the circumstances they have had to live through but because they have been able to transcend the pettiness of daily life and create a new world order. They do not shed their identities but give free rein to the wide range of emotions that each situation brings forth in them. For this reason their reactions and experiences go much beyond the war between civilizations and the authority of the State.

In the play *Los Baños de Argel*, there are also scenes of commiseration between the slave owners Halima and Zahara and Constanza their Christian slave. Halima is the wife of Caurali the corsair chief who has looted Spanish villages and brought back captives. To comfort her slave she says,

Al no tener libertad.
No hay mal que tenga igualdad
Sólo yo sin ser esclava. (287)

[When one does not have freedom
there is no misfortune that can equal it
I know this without being a slave].

What attracts Halima to Constanza and Silvia to Zahara is what they perceive as a virtue in the Christians: their
stoicism in the midst of their slavery. Constanza, their slave whom they have befriended, inspires in them a desire to know about other latitudes and conditions of life. Feeling the warm vibrations of friendship, Constanza tells them of the man she lost when she was captured. These interactions are not just an exercise in tolerance of the Other but also a recognition of the Other’s singularity and difference. Constanza feels that Halima can be useful and thus cultivates her. This friendship is ambiguous with occasional distances but the latter underline the distinct place that the Other occupies. Zahara the Moorish woman, who has offered Don Lope all her fortune in return for letting her cross the border with him, is even more open in her complete admiration for the culture of the Christian captives. She confides her desire to Constanza and asks for her advice and Halima suspects nothing amiss calling her ‘una gran amiga del saber’ [a lover of learning]. On the other hand, Zahara remonstrates with Don Fernando when she senses that he will deceive Halima in order to make good his own escape. One has to recognize that relations with the Other will always be criss-crossed by fault lines and antagonisms of one kind or another, by religion, gender or social class, but these protagonists are unwavering in their endeavour to communicate with the strangers in their midst.

Critics who prefer to see in these works irredeemable polarizations point to the endings of these plays as proof that the protagonists of the two religions return to their essentialisms and that rarely do these interactions end well. For this reason, from the beginning they are suspicious of friendly initiatives. But even within the same religion, the same contretemps can occur.
The theme and title of this paper owe much to the wisdom of Jacques Derrida who in his book *The Politics of Friendship*, has said that there is inequality and repression in the traditional concept of friendship as we inherit it. He wonders if it is necessary to politically agree with a friend to enter into friendship and how it is possible to have a friend who is politically an enemy. Quoting Aristotle he says that at times it is necessary to betray friendship in the quest for justice but in any case friendship like hospitality has to be negotiated at every instant. In his words, «The object of love may not be able to acknowledge that love or even return it; for it may be the case that the friend who receives love is really the enemy» and a few lines later, «To be capable of this friendship, to be able to honour in the friend the enemy he can become, is a sign of freedom».7

In the light of these ideas the ambivalence in the work of Lope de Vega, his apparent shifting of perspective as regards the representation of the Moors can perhaps be understood. Writing on the contrast between Lope and Cervantes, Albert Mas confirms that the Moorish theme is present in Lope to add local colour to the plot unlike for Cervantes who was a witness to the events he described. Cervantes’s Muslim characters are an ethnic group unlike those of Lope. Although Thomas Case in his *Lope and Islam*, made the case that the encounters between Moorish and Christians in the plays of Lope de Vega were but ‘a romanticization of a brutal past’, or *Maurophilia*8, there has been a rereading of the latter and its rehabilitation and Luce Lopez Baralt avers that after the recent studies the «belles lettres of Moorish literature have lost forever their innocence. This literature too has to be now read as a
"literature of protest" a dissident literature to be read between the lines.⁹

Maria Soledad Carrasco Urgoiti had also highlighted Lope's 'comedias de moros' as throwing light on frontier life of the XVII Century. Lope's *Los melindres de Belisa* is not a part of Lope's earlier plays. It however has Muslim protagonists as secondary characters and is interesting from our point of view because it proves Thomas O'Connor's theory who in *Love in the Corral*,¹⁰ elaborates how the comedy was subversive because it gave free rein to individual will in love and romance and marriage, qualities of the Renaissance that were in danger of being dissipated with the growing conservatism of the Church, and the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition in the seventeenth century.

The protagonists of *Los melindres de Belisa* with their spectacular loves within the space of a play reveal to the audience the hidden truths difficult to express in the framework of the dominant ideology of the hierarchical society of the XVII Century in Spain. They discover for us the options that can be cannily fought for within restrictive religious and ethnic identities. One can play roles in the theatre and in real life and the dramatists have shown how in different ways it is possible to keep options open. The Moors in this play are secondary characters, apologetic about their ancestry and work as slaves in the houses of Christians, where the latter fall in love with them. The difficult to please Belisa, of noble birth, who has long postponed having a husband and has rejected many well placed suitors, falls in love with Felisardo, their Muslim servant, as does her mother Lisarda. Meanwhile her brother Don Juan is in love with the Muslim servant girl Zara or Celia. The so called Moorish slaves play their roles and
don Muslim dress to disguise identities because their real owner Eliso owes Lisarda and Don Juan money and he has given the family his slaves instead. The Moors reveal their true identity at the end of the play. But the fact that the main protagonist falls in love with supposed Moors does much for the image of Moors in a country that had officially expelled them. They are again imagined as possible subjects with whom love and marriage is possible. This is manifested when the whimsical Belisa confesses to wanting a Muslim servant and says:

¡Mal haya quien hizo
leyes desiguales
que lo peque el gusto,
y el honor lo pague! (178)

[He who has made laws of inequality has done wrong, desire errs and honour pays the price!]

And then she sorrowfully enquires of her servant girl explaining her passion for Felisardo,

Deja de ser hermosura,
hermosura en cualquier parte?
¿Dejará de ser diamante
el que lo nació en la mina
porque esté en la mano indina
o porque le cubra el guante?

[Does beauty stop being beauty in other places?]
Does a diamond lose its sheen because it has been found in a mine, because it is worn by a mean hand or covered by a glove?]

The slaves who pretend to be Muslims say they were born in Oran or in the Alpujarras and this occasions their misfortunes, but given that the expulsion of the Moors was already a reality, Belisa’s words are subversive and a heartfelt streak of disobedience of official policy.

Belisa is aware of the danger she faces but is obstinate about a love that seems to those around her so obviously a folly. The prejudices of the age are revealed in sentences like those of her mother Lisarda who advises her son Don Juan not to pursue his desires for Celia or Zara because she is Muslim.

No tienes mujeres por allí bellas y libres?
Deja esta mora porque en efecto es mora;
No trates de vencerla que es delito
Que nos puede costar hacienda y honra. (192)

[Don’t you know other beautiful free women?
Leave this Moorish girl because in effect she is Muslim,
Do not try to win her because it is a crime
That can cost us honour and fortune].

The individualistic aberrant behaviour of Lope’s protagonists is aptly captured in this quote by Derrida,
The truth of friendship is a madness of truth, a truth that has nothing to do with the wisdom which, throughout the history of philosophy qua the history of reason, will have set the tone of this truth - by attempting to have us believe that amorous passion was madness, no doubt, but that friendship was the way of wisdom and of knowledge, no less than of political justice.¹¹

Elsewhere in his book, Derrida’s aim is to show that the entire Western tradition of thinking about politics has been distorted by the original sin of the concept of identity. People are encouraged to seek membership in undifferentiated homogenizing groups like families and classes because they are supposed to be free from internal difference. For Derrida, fraternity is also a bad word because it makes different individuals the same but Derrida asserts that there is no natural fraternity or maternity. Everything depends on language and there are constructs which cover up hierarchies of foreigners and friends and enemies.

Lope’s protagonists by exploring other possible identities (Belisa as the lover of Felisardo, the slave who pretended to be a Muslim; Zahara as the lover of Aurelio the Christian) temporarily forget their place in their own societies but suggest to the audience that it is not necessary to resign oneself to the identity one is born with.
Bibliography:


Notes:


2. «Ainsi se dessine un rapport spécifique du théâtre cervantin à l’Histoire: une histoire que n’est plus seulement matériau, incorporé à la fiction dramatique ou au contraire exclu par elle, mais devenir où cette fiction prend forme et don’t les contradictions sont tour à tour exprimées, masquées, transposées par une écriture et un langage multiples. C’est donc ce rapport ambigu d’insertion, mais aussi d’engagement – qui commande le sens premier d’une production a la fois une et diverse». Canavaggio, 977, p. 384.

3. «Qu’elle ait pour cadre un lieu concret – Alger, Oran, Séville, Madrid – ou qu’elle se situe dans un lieu imaginaire – palais, campagne, forêt – l’action des comedias et des entremeses ne s’élaborer ni à partir de ce lieu, ni par référence exclusive à lui. Elle s’inscrit dans un espace extrascénique que construit un langage, avant même que ne le transcrire une mise en scène. De cette priorité du texte sur le spectacle – particulièrement sensible dans des œuvres conçues hors du contact direct avec le public – découle la configuration de cet espace: une configuration complexe que dessinent les actions engendrées par le dialogue et les relations que se nouent entre ceux que l’animent. C’est dire que l’espace dramatique cervantin est la résultante des rapports qui se tissent entre les personnages: entendons par là, non des individus, des essences psychologiques mais des “dramatis personae” susceptibles comme le veut Aristote, de constituer le support des actions répresentées. Est il possible de discerner si ces “dramatis personae” s’organisent selon un système unique? Tout donne à penser au contraire que la typologie du théâtre de Cervantes est rien moins qu’homogène; mais encore faut
il découvrir la loi de sa disparité». Canavaggio, 1977, p. 191.