

Erasing Men from *Álbum de familia* by Rosario Castellanos

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Out of a great number of critiques of Rosario Castellanos' short stories in the collection *Álbum de familia*, most focus on the woman protagonist of "Lección de cocina", treating this work from a traditional feminist perspective – as a portrayal of patriarchal oppression of women. The few analyses of the male characters in the three stories consider them representations of grotesque machismo objectifying women to protect the patriarchal status quo, fought against by women worldwide. Evelyn Fishburn, for one, sees Castellanos' "mocking repetition of patriarchal truisms" as an attack on machismo "not only because it is shown to be unjust but because it is unheroic and shabby" (Fishburn 1998: xiii-xiv).

However, a close reading of the three stories in *Álbum de familia* might cause one to question whether the men were solely responsible for the women's plight. Are the women being victimized, or are they the oppressors? If we consider the relationship between men and women in Castellanos' works as an example of the Self/Other dichotomy, a generally accepted view would make the woman the man's Other, thus subjugating the former and giving the latter the power to change the Other. This relationship locks the Self and Other in a rigid standoff, arguably perpetuated by both sides. According to Toril Moi, "[t]he promotion and valorization of Otherness will never liberate the oppressed. It is, of course, hopelessly idealistic to assume that Otherness somehow causes oppression" (Moi 1988: 12). Most analyses of women as Other in Castellanos' work propagate the traditional hegemonic dichotomy of gender: men-oppressors vs. women-oppressed. It is time to challenge this approach.

This study argues that while the character of the woman undergoes progressive development, the character of the man suffers degeneration under the woman's direct influence. The analysis of the objectification of men in the three stories focuses on men protagonists losing cognition as they move backwards in the hierarchy of human needs. Particular attention is paid to the breakdown in verbal communication, reversal of sexual roles, and the use of food as a means of subcognitive manipulation. The examination of this process draws upon Rosario Castellanos' own essays on feminism, theory of human motivation, and a number of studies of discourse ownership and power. This study will argue that in the three stories the man is presented as a textual construct in the woman's power to be manipulated to fit the storyline. This approach has been adopted earlier for the study of text ownership in the works of Mexican counterculture. The analysis concluded that the narrator's control over the storyline and the protagonists allows him/her to re-write one in order to sustain the other. Thus, the narrator can exercise unlimited power over the protagonists, ultimately erasing or completely re-creating them if their present character is in conflict with the storyline preferred by the narrator (Carpenter 2009).

Reading women protagonists in *Álbum de familia* as proponents of the traditional marital status quo who are in fear of losing life's luxuries that come with a monetarily comfortable marriage, does not contradict Castellanos' feminist stance. On the contrary, Castellanos challenged women's supposed inability to change the existing marital structure, a kind of gender-determined learned helplessness. In her essay "La liberación de la mujer, aquí", surprisingly rarely quoted by feminist critics of her work, Castellanos states that "el ser un parásito (que es eso lo que somos, más que unas víctimas) no deja de tener sus encantos" (Castellanos 1987: 51). While recognising the dominance of a patriarchal system, Castellanos charges women with promulgating it by conforming to the submissive role. Her essay "Costumbres mexicanas", another unjustly overlooked work, examines women's submissive nature as a result and a cause of traditional marital roles. Society's expectations of women and men, according to Castellanos, reduce both to objects. So the change of status quo is women's responsibility as much as it is men's. Castellanos demonstrates the grotesque results of this conformity in the progression – or, rather, regression – of the man's character, as he is being objectified by the woman-protagonist in an attempt to protect the existing tradition of matrimonial roles. Castellanos states that in Mexico, "la protesta femenina no ha sido nunca descarada y franca. La actitud inicial es la de aceptar, sin discusión de ninguna índole, la situación de inferioridad; la de compartir y defender acaloradamente todas las ideas, todos los prejuicios, todas las costumbres que hacen posible esa situación. [...] Mujeres que como saben un poquito más que las demás les aconsejan que nunca, nunca y por ningún motivo

intenten salirse de la regla” (Castellanos 1997: 122). Thus, patriarchal status quo is knowingly and actively maintained by both men and women.

The first three stories in the collection *Álbum de familia* are narrated by the woman protagonist; the first story is a first-person narrative, and the other two are third-person narratives. Since the point of view in all three stories originates with the woman-narrator, and “the analysis of point of view in fiction is the unveiling of authorial control” (Currie 1998: 18-9), it may be argued that women remain in control of the narrative in all three stories, as will become evident later. At first, it appears that the stories represent a linear temporal progression from the present (“Lección de cocina”) to the future of the woman’s traditional matrimonial role (“Domingo” and “Cabecita blanca”). However, considering the enigmatic ‘y sin embargo...’ at the end of “Lección de cocina”, both “Domingo” and “Cabecita blanca” may represent two possible complementary outcomes based upon the woman’s choice of roles. On the one hand, the woman can conform to a submissive model designed by society – a traditional perception of the woman-victim vs. the man-aggressor (most feminist theories support this framework); from another theoretical perspective, the man-subject (Self) dominates and defines the woman-object (Other). On the other hand, she can conform to the role she has designed for herself (the woman-subject vs. the man-object). The woman has been behaving within this pattern in “Lección de cocina”, recognising the dual role she plays (for herself vs. for society), so her conscious choice would not affect her performance but rather her perception of herself. Will it affect the way she treats the man? Most likely the man will remain an object, as the woman continues to be the manipulator of a traditional view of herself and the man in order to preserve the aforementioned status quo.

Although it has been assumed by critics (Fishburn 1995, Hart 1993, Lindstrom 1980, to name but a few) that the man actively exercises the role of subject, there is no direct and little indirect evidence to support this. Instead, there are several indicators of the man being perceived by the woman-narrator as becoming progressively un-cognitive and therefore no longer in control of discourse. Hitchcock states that “[t]here can be no absolute monopoly of language or language use because signs as communication are shared (and even if the speaker does not want to share, the signs are stolen)” (Hitchcock 1993: 8). Men are not sole owners of the text, nor are women excluded from text ownership. By appropriating more and more narrative power, women monopolize the text; as a result, men are rendered non-verbal (and, ultimately, non-cognitive) and therefore removed from the communication chain. Furthermore, “[t]he word and the act are never quite one’s own” (id., 17): while there is no absolute monopoly of the text, the degree of text ownership determines the distribution of power in gender relations. For example, in “Lección de cocina” and “Cabecita

blanca” the man does not speak, nor is he directly quoted. Instead, in “Lección de cocina” the woman puts words into the man’s mouth, so to speak, predicting his future complaints. In “Cabecita blanca” the exact words of the husband’s outburst of rage aimed at the couple’s gay son are all but forgotten (Castellanos 1996: 55). The woman appropriates both sides of the discourse and she refuses to allow the man to participate independently in it. One may say that this is a defensive reaction against patriarchal society subjugating women. However, I would argue that the woman narrator perpetuates patriarchal order by preserving the dominant/subjugated dichotomy of gender relations.

It would be natural to suggest that the regression of male character follows the reverse order of the hierarchy of human needs, since the motivation to satisfy a series of needs determines the development of human character. Abraham Maslow’s theory of human motivation states that human needs are arranged in the order of their cognitive nature, which determines the level of importance of their satisfaction. Thus, to achieve higher levels of development it is important to satisfy primary needs, including sexual desire (Maslow 1970: 35-8). This hierarchy consists of five levels of needs, from the very basic (primal) to the specifically human: (1) physiological needs, hunger, thirst, sexual desire; (2) need for safety and security (both physical and emotional), which implies not only shelter but also a safe routine in predictable surroundings; (3) need for love and belonging, characterized by reciprocal affectionate relationships with friends and loved ones; (4) need for self-esteem, defined by Maslow as a “desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of [oneself], for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others” (id., 45); and finally (5) need for self-actualisation, a desire to be what one can be, that is, to fulfil one’s potential. It should be noted that “[if] all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background” (id., 37). In other words, when more basic, primal needs (of physiological satisfaction and safety) are unmet, they dominate one’s existence completely, whereas unmet cognitive needs (for love, esteem, and self-actualisation) do not impede one’s everyday life.

The main premise of the theory of motivation is that human development depends solely on moving up the hierarchy of needs. “The organism is dominated and its behavior organized only by unsatisfied needs” (id., 38). A human being cannot proceed to satisfy more cognitive needs until primary needs are met. At the same time the human’s present and future existence depends solely on the process of satisfaction of an unmet need; “gratification [...] releases the organism from the domination of a relatively more physiological need, permitting thereby the emergence of other more social goals” (ibid.). The satisfaction of cognitive needs depends on first meeting physiological needs. Maslow states that this

level of needs is present in animals as well as primates and is therefore classified as a primal or animal need, whereas the second level (safety and security) is most prominent in children and remains in the human psyche throughout the course of life. It should be emphasized that the satisfaction of the safety need is a primal act since it is as acute in baby animals as in human babies and children. However, in adult animals it is exhibited on an instinctoid¹ level as the instinct of self-preservation, while adult humans lose a pronounced need for safety and security. This is due to the fact that adult humans cannot “fend for themselves” physically and rationalize their behaviour, whereas children may be looking for safety because they lack the physical strength and the necessary capability to defend themselves, as well as self-confidence based upon cognitive maturity. Maslow concludes that this need is less primal since its satisfaction loses its acuteness as a child grows up and develops cognitive abilities (id., 39-43).

Taking the above into consideration, we can posit that the objectification of men in the three stories follows the reverse order of need manifestation: from love/esteem to basic physiological needs. According to the motivation theory, when the human organism “is dominated by a certain need [...] the whole philosophy of the future tends also to change” (id., 37). The man protagonist’s character will change in accordance with the need that the woman narrator assigns him. The man resists this domination by behaving aggressively. For example, I argue elsewhere that in “Lección de cocina” the woman narrator’s thoughts of divorce threaten the man’s security in marriage. The man (embodied by a piece of meat) fights back by redirecting the woman’s attention to the burning of the roast (see Carpenter 2000). If we consider the phallic nature of the roast, we can draw a parallel between the meat/man’s resistance to change and the defensive nature of masculinity. Tom Ryan sees masculinity “as a defensive construction developed over the early years out of a need to emphasize a difference, a separateness from the mother. In the extreme this is manifested by machismo behaviour with its emphasis on competitiveness, strength, aggressiveness, contempt for women and emotional shallowness, all serving to keep the male secure in his separate identity” (cited in Metcalf and Humphries 1985: 26).² Such activation of a defense mechanism is reminiscent of Maslow’s stipulation that defensive mechanisms are activated when the conditions for satisfying needs are threatened: “If we remember that the cognitive capacities (perceptual, intellectual, learning) are a set of adjustive tools, which have, among other functions, that of satisfaction of our basic needs, then it is clear that any danger to them, any deprivation or blocking of their free use, must also be indirectly threatening to the basic needs themselves. [...] Secrecy, censorship, dishonesty, blocking of communication threaten all the basic needs” (Maslow 1970: 47).

“Lección de cocina” is probably the best known of the three stories in the collection. Its plot is rather simple: a newlywed is cooking dinner for her husband, reminiscing about her single life and imagining what matrimony holds for her. Distracted, she burns the roast that she has been trying to prepare. By the end of the story, the woman is faced with a choice: tell her husband what happened, cook another meal, or hope that he will invite her to go to a restaurant. The two protagonists in the story are the woman (who is also the narrator), and the roast she is preparing, which can be seen as the representation of the woman’s husband. Some critics either ignore it completely or approach it literally as a dinner roast (Hart, Lindstrom). Nahum Megged argues that “carne equivale a sexo [...] Asimismo, carne y hueso significan ser vivo, existente” (Megged 1984: 132). Evelyn Fishburn compares meat to the course of a woman’s life: “an interesting comparison can be drawn between the different stages of cooking and the passing of a woman’s life” (Fishburn 1995: 97). She also draws a questionable parallel between the appearance of the meat and a bride’s “rite of passage”: “a different interpretation, centred on the sexual act, would see the frozen meat as shrouded in a white bridal gown of ice” (id., 98).

However, it is also conceivable that the meat represents the woman’s husband. Throughout the story, changes in the meat’s appearance coincide with the pivotal points of the woman’s analysis of her past and present roles; these changes can be seen as the man’s response to the woman’s monologue. They are also suggestive of the man’s sexual character. This is most evident in the first appearance of the meat as the woman removes it from the freezer – stiff and red, like an erect penis: “Y no es sólo exceso de lógica el que me inhibe el hambre. Es también el aspecto [de la carne], rígido por el frío; es el color que se manifiesta ahora que he desbaratado el paquete. Rojo, como si estuviera a punto de echarse a sangrar” (Castellanos 1996: 9). It should be noted that the man’s sexual desire (symbolised by the image of a rigid, red penis) is the only character trait described in detail; as far as his cognitive or emotional nature is concerned, there is little or no reference to it. The meat/man exhibits no personality traits, only physical attributes: it is described as red, stiff, grey, flaccid, cooked, burnt, and twisted. In the woman’s thoughts about her husband, the man is given virtually no voice – there is only one allusion to his future contribution to family discourse: “Y tú no bajarás al día por la escala de mis trenzas sino por los pasos de una querrela minuciosa: se te ha desprendido un botón del saco, el pan está quemado, el café frío” (id., 15). A sarcastic juxtaposition of a fairy-tale setting (“por la escala de mis trenzas” alludes to Rapunzel) and a daily list of complaints from someone who cannot perform simple tasks, reverses gender power roles. Now the woman sees the man as inept and therefore in need of her care. This interpretation supports the view of the story as a process of “deconstructing male

patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked” (Greene and Kahn 1985: 38).

The fact that the woman has to take care of the piece of meat reinforces the representation of the man/child as dependent on the woman/mother, without whom he would not be able to mature (in this case, the act of cooking symbolizes the process of growing up). The exhibition of the man’s childlike traits becomes more prominent as the story progresses, and reaches its pinnacle in the burning of the meat, which may be seen metaphorically as an irreversible regression to childhood. As the woman imagines addressing the judge at the divorce court (“Que así no es posible vivir, que yo quiero divorciarme” [Castellanos 1996: 19]), she forgets to check the meat, and it is burnt. Once the idea of divorce enters the woman’s mind, she reaches the limit of her role as the man’s caretaker because she no longer has to comply with her role in marriage. If the woman carries out the threat, she would make the husband assume the responsibility for living alone and fending for himself. The divorce fantasy represents a threat of potential loss of the man/child’s caretaker and protector. In order to restore his safe routine, the man has to redirect the woman’s attention back to his needs. This is accomplished by the meat burning itself, which connotes a powerful outburst of emotions on the man’s part. The meat also reaches the point of no return: “Se enrosca igual que una charamusca” (ibid.). Nahum Megged argues that the meat assumes the position of a foetus, reverting to an infantile state of total helplessness and dependence on the mother figure: “La carne que se enrosca como volviendo a su estado inicial de feto” (Megged 1984: 147). Although this interpretation is quite plausible in light of the meat/man’s childlike traits being exhibited throughout the story, another reading of this scene from the same perspective is that the foetal position represents the last stage of the meat/man/child’s metaphoric temper tantrum. The emotional outbreak (reflected in the burning) has no effect on the woman’s determination to break the mother-child bond, so the meat/man recoils and tries to start taking care of its emotional needs in the absence of the woman/mother. In other words, the meat/man/child tries to grow up. It assumes the foetal position in the roasting pan the way a child would curl up on the floor after a tantrum or a fight, trying to calm himself down.

In “Domingo” the character of the woman is different from that in “Lección de cocina”, and the difference is not only in the women’s age and marital experience, but also in their attitudes towards themselves, their husbands, and their marital relations. Edith, a middle-aged wife and mother, is preparing for a party with her friends. The guests – including a film director, an actress, and several other characters, wrought with personal problems – spend the Sunday afternoon providing Edith with ample opportunities to observe and direct human interaction as if it were a play. Edith’s life is comfortable and predictable in its routine. Her

husband, Carlos, has been unfaithful to her, and she knows it. While a newly-wed in “Lección de cocina” is outraged by the idea that her husband might be unfaithful to her in the future (Castellanos 1996: 17), Edith resolves to remain with her husband. Moreover, she has an affair of which her husband is aware but does not appear to disapprove. The conventions of their marriage (children, property, etc.), and the habits Edith and Carlos have developed over the years prevent them from separating: “vínculos tan sólidos como Carlos y ella. Los hijos, las propiedades en común, hasta la manera especial de tomar una taza de chocolate antes de dormir. Realmente sería muy difícil, sería imposible romper” (Castellanos 1996: 27). The men in this story are depicted as irresponsible, running away from their relationship problems. Edith sees her husband Carlos as a spoiled child, and actively dismisses his behaviour (and consequently his character) as unimportant: “No les hagas caso – terció Edith –. Siempre juegan así” (id., 35). As the man tries to draw the woman back into their shared life, he attempts to satisfy a need for belonging rather than a need to dominate. The woman, on the other hand, ignores the man’s attempts, while pretending to pay attention. When Carlos comments on what he had read in the newspaper, “Edith atendía dócilmente (era un viejo hábito que la había ayudado mucho en la convivencia) y luego iba a lo suyo” (id., 25). The breakdown in family discourse is more visible in “Domingo” than in “Lección de cocina”; however, there is no evidence that either the woman narrator or the man protagonist considers the breakdown in discourse damaging to their marriage.

The culmination of communication breakdown bordering on overt objectification is best revealed in “Cabecita blanca”, where the man becomes completely inconsequential and the process of objectification irreversible. The central character of the story is Señora Justina, whose husband Juan Carlos died several years ago. One of her daughters is a spinster, another has been divorced. Justina’s homosexual son breaks up with his lover by the end of the story. Paley Francescato summarises Justina’s life as follows: “La señora Justina [...], a pesar de creer que ha hecho lo mejor posible de su vida ha llegado a la degradación que ella ve como mejoramiento, pero que el lector percibe claramente que no lo es” (Paley Francescato 1980: 118). Justina is emotionally isolated from her family (except her son, whom she sees as her saviour), the same way she was isolated from her husband. The isolation began on the wedding night, with the conflict between the husband’s animal-like sexual expression and the wife’s ignorance in this matter: “Cuando Juan Carlos se volvió loco la noche misma de la boda y le exigió realizar unos actos de contorsionismo que ella no había visto ni en el Circo Atayde, la señora Justina se esforzó en complacerlo y fue lográndolo más y más a medida que adquiría práctica” (Castellanos 1996: 53). Juan Carlos’s sexual behaviour is interpreted by Justina as a sign of physical or

mental abnormality. This attitude is similar to that of the newlywed in “Lección de cocina”, who associates the physical signs of sexual arousal with illness or pain (id., 9).

There is no cognitive link between the two partners, nor are there any references (direct or implied) to Juan Carlos’ cognitive or emotional self. Genevieve Lloyd “specifically mentions the exclusion from the responsibilities of the nurturing tasks of the private domain as a formative influence on such masculine public rationalities” (Middleton 1992: 118). This exclusion is complete by the end of “Cabecita blanca”. The man is stripped of all responsibilities to his family, and his impact on the family is no longer of any consequence and probably never was. Juan Carlos’ primal nature is also reflected in Justina’s attitude towards him, which is similar to an animal owner’s attitude towards a pet. His sexual behaviour is referred to as “sobresaltos”, and the burial expenses are considered an extravagance: “su pobre padre estaba muerto y enterrado en una tumba perpetuidad en el Panteón Francés. Muchos criticaron a la señora Justina por derrochadora pero ella pensó que no era el momento de reparar en gastos cuando se trataba de una ocasión única y, además, solemne” (Castellanos 1996: 48). The implicit comparison of the man to an animal is reinforced in the quotation “había caído en las garras de una mala mujer que mermaría su fortaleza física, sus ingresos económicos y su atención [...] a la legítima” (ibid.). The man is seen primarily as a victim of a bird of prey, which is usually a small animal; this is a far cry from the formidable aggressor he is supposed to be. Only then is the man presented as a provider of financial stability, and finally as a marital partner. The woman considers the man’s vulnerability to be due to cognitive ineptitude, his most significant trait. With years, Justina assumes the role of Juan Carlos’ caretaker, and he becomes sub-human, incapable of expressing himself – an inconvenience at best. This attitude is best revealed in the following quotation: “Juan Carlos se irritaba cuando su mujer no entendía lo que le estaba diciendo” (id., 56). Although one may say that the woman does not understand the man because she is considered dumb, I would argue that the man loses his communication ability due to his lack of cognitive function as he regresses back to having to tend to his instinctoid needs. The only time he expresses emotion is when he is older and “muy majadero”: once again his character is criticized, and his angry words to Luisito are forgotten even though they appear to have destroyed a happy family: “¿qué fue lo que le dijo? La señora Justina ya no se acordaba pero ha de haber sido algo muy feo” (id., 55). The man’s lack of cognition becomes a metaphoric barrier between the partners and leads to their emotional separation and isolation.

The breakdown in communication represents the woman’s perception of the man as a child with little or no cognitive qualities, who has little chance of

growing up into a self-sufficient adult. The man-child in the stories regresses in his development, losing cognitive cohesion along with his character. From the Foucaultian perspective, the man protagonist is written out of the narrative by the woman-narrator (“Lección de cocina”) or the woman-protagonist who determines the narration (“Domingo” and “Cabecita blanca”). His personality is metaphorically killed when he is denied a voice: he can no longer use language as a means of self-signifying (see Foucault 1977: 53-67). At first, the man is “tú” (in the first half of “Lección de cocina”), yet the reason for his speaking is determined by the woman representing/voicing the traditional gendered dichotomy. Ultimately, the man does not speak, nor is he quoted; the woman addresses him directly only once, and even then the reply is not expected but assigned to him. Every time the man is addressed as “tú”, the woman predetermines his behaviour, often seeing it as ridiculous, capricious and not deserving more than superficial attention. Later in the same story, the man is presented in the third person with the right to speak – yet the meaning is deconstructed by the woman, who reconstructs it to satisfy traditional matrimonial discourse.

In “Domingo” the woman dismisses the man’s preoccupations, needs and feelings as superfluous. Finally, in “Cabecita blanca”, the man is as faceless as he is voiceless, erased from marital discourse first in content, then in form. The woman asserts herself as the manipulator of a submissive man: “el sitio de un hombre es su trabajo, la cantina o la casa chica” (Castellanos 1996: 49). This is an ironic paraphrase of the proverbial assertion that a woman’s place is in the kitchen; the original appears at the beginning of “Lección de cocina” – “en el proverbio alemán la mujer es sinónimo de Küche, Kinder, Kirche” (id., 7). Just as the woman’s role was initially limited to cooking, praying and procreation, the man’s role is reduced to working, eating and satisfying his sexual urges. It is interesting that the roles of the woman (although apparently limiting) are more productive and of a higher cognitive order. The woman is a constant provider and protector of all the family’s wants (from satisfying hunger to continuing the blood line and meeting spiritual needs), whereas the man is capable only of satisfying his own needs (hunger and sexual desire), and marginally complying with his role as a working provider for the family. While it is conceivable that the paraphrase is intended to show that the woman has finally taken power away from the man by assigning him a place, it seems uncanny that the collection hosts both versions. Considering that the woman in “Cabecita blanca” has little or no concern for the man, the paraphrased quotation presents her as manipulative and dominating, while the man is reduced to a submissive character, unable to change the behavioural pattern dictated to him by the woman. The statement “El lugar adecuado para un marido era en el que ahora reposaba su difunto Juan Carlos” (id., 49), further denotes a lack of respect, as the man becomes an object

belonging to the woman. The use of the formal term “difunto” signifies that the woman’s relationship with her husband lacks closeness or emotional intimacy; combined with repeated generalisations based on a traditional perception of gender qualities and the woman’s dismissal of the man’s cognitive abilities, the lack of closeness becomes primarily the woman’s responsibility.

The man’s only permanent characteristic (which also takes on ridiculous proportions) is his sexual prowess, seen by many critics as a means of domination over women. In Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, sexual satisfaction is one of the fundamental basic physical needs, along with hunger and need for shelter (Maslow 1970: 96). It is therefore necessary to consider the sexual relationship and the use of food as a means of manipulating the man on a pre-cognitive level.

In “Lección de cocina”, the presence of multiple references to sexual acts and the description of the action of “tearing” support this interpretation; yet, the consistent evoking of masturbatory images connote the woman’s sexual independence (Castellanos 1996: 16). Later, in “Domingo”, sexual roles become so ambiguous and multi-layered that gender borders are once again challenged, as they were in “Lección de cocina”, only this time the woman does not question the role assigned to her, but uses it to manipulate and objectify the man. Edith perceives the scene in the parlour as part of a play she is directing. This artificiality is combined with the memory of sensual aspects of painting³ and references to the men’s impotence, thus rendering the men’s sexual abilities inadequate and therefore dismissible. Edith’s lover Rafael and husband Carlos have already been dismissed for their inability to fulfill the roles she has assigned them. In “Cabecita blanca” the sexual link between the partners is permanently broken after the birth of the last child, and the woman completely separates herself from the man. She rejects him as an expendable part of marriage, useful in the material sense (to provide for a comfortable existence), yet unable to offer emotional support. The man’s own comfort is no longer of any importance: when Juan Carlos is ill, Justina takes care of him rather grudgingly, implicitly blaming him for making her work: “La señora Justina se esmeraba en cuidar a su marido, que nunca tuvo buen temple para los achaques y que ahora no soportaba sus dolores o molestias sin desahogarse sobre su esposa encontrando torpes e inoportunas sus sugerencias, insuficientes sus desvelos, inútiles sus precauciones” (id., 58). Hence, the man’s need for belonging and safety is no longer fulfilled, but ignored. Even the more basic need for food is satisfied on a rudimentary level, as demonstrated by Juan Carlos’ overzealous praise of the fruit brought to him by his secretary. Notwithstanding the notion that such an attitude betrays Juan Carlos’ infatuation with the secretary, it reveals the fact that he no longer receives this kind of treatment from his family. His daughters’

disgust at his display reinforces the family's perception of Juan Carlos as a non-entity, stripped of meaning.

The use of food to manipulate the man protagonist also deserves attention. The link to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs is self-evident, considering that hunger is one of the basic physiological needs. First, food is treated creatively ("Lección de cocina"); cooking a meal is the pivotal point of the story that determines the plot and its outcome. The woman's deciding which dish to cook symbolizes the perception she has of her marriage, her husband's role in it, and her own position of intellectual authority since she is the one assigning roles in this relationship: "Un plato sencillo y sano. Como no representa la superación de ninguna antinomia ni el planteamiento de ninguna aporía, no se me antoja" (id., 19).

The role of the cookbook in the story is significant. On the surface, the cookbook represents a male-dominated society with little or no respect for women's intelligence. The quotations may appear to be a condescending lecture designed to "relegate clever young women to the status which the cookbook so cleverly gives them: that of instinctive housewives lacking in brains" (Lindstrom 1980: 72). However, further analysis of the quotations suggests that the cookbook is a metaphoric representation of the woman's ego that bears semblance to her mother and other female figures of authority – in other words, the ones who create and support the existing matrimonial conventions. The woman's changing attitude towards meat and often aggressive handling of the roast (Castellanos 1996: 11) suggests dominance and manipulation for the purpose of establishing control over the man and preserving the status quo as far as traditional marital roles are concerned. It is possible that when the man is still considered a cognitive entity, food is seen as more than just nourishment. In this case, it is a vehicle for structuring meaning: using traditional forms of self-identification, the woman restructures her perception of the man's character.

Once the couple becomes more firmly implanted in the traditional marital pattern, cooking changes its primary role from a device of active manipulation to a tool of cognitive distinction: "Edith [...] sonrió con ese mismo juego de músculos que los demás traducían como tímida disculpa y que gustaba tanto a su marido en los primeros tiempos de la luna de miel. Carlos se sintió inmediatamente tranquilizado. – Pensaba si no nos caería bien comer pato a la naranja... y también en la fragilidad de los sentimientos humanos" (id., 27). Notwithstanding the obvious reference to the woman playing a traditional role of timid submission, the juxtaposition of a meal and a philosophical question is suggestive of the two roles the woman assumes: that of a housewife and that of a "thinker" in the family (i.e. the man). Therefore, Carlos is no longer required to fulfil that role; instead, he is expected to –and indeed does– calm down under the woman's

overt submissiveness, which betrays covert strength in a true *marianista* fashion. One may say that Carlos, as Edith sees him, is a mere child, easy to lull into a false sense of security. The issue of security is enhanced through the elaborate use of alcohol in the party scene (id., 40-6), since one of the effects of alcohol is the feeling of relaxation and euphoria, both of which connote a feeling of safety (albeit subjectively perceived rather than existing objectively). As the food becomes the means of cognitive distinction between the woman and the man, the man is denied autonomous cognition by the woman. Ultimately, when the man lacks cognition (from the woman's perspective) and is treated as an object, food becomes irrelevant as nothing more than nourishment necessary for basic survival ("Cabecita blanca").

Thus, the man's needs are presented in reverse order: from love and belonging (which is challenged from the start in "Lección de cocina"), to emotional security and physical safety, and finally to basic physiological needs. It should be noted that these needs are identified yet never fully satisfied. And, since unsatisfied needs determine human behaviour, the man's actions are aimed at meeting the most urgent needs as they arise, while the woman removes one by one the support mechanisms necessary for their satisfaction.

The analysis of the three stories in *Álbum de familia* has revealed a progressive erasing of male characters in the text. This process reflects the reversal of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs from the love/belonging stage back to basic survival needs. First, in "Lección de cocina", the man is still seeking belonging before safety or physiological satisfaction. Later, in "Domingo", the man is seeking safety and security (in a predictable routine); the focus then shifts to sexual satisfaction. Although there is a pronounced need for friendship and common interests on the man's behalf, the woman does not participate in this interaction as an equal. Instead, she perceives her husband's relationship with his friends as that of a child with his playmates. Finally, in "Cabecita blanca", the man is portrayed first as sexually insatiable and later as an inconsequential non-cognitive entity.

The analysis also demonstrates the link between the hierarchy of human needs and text ownership: as the man loses his ability to speak independently, he regresses downward through the hierarchy of needs. Higher cognitive needs are taken away with the words because the condition of freedom is broken. As a result, the man becomes a textual construct and is controlled by the woman, who manipulates his characteristics to fit the changing storyline. In this case, women are manipulators; men are, therefore, victims. This is the reversal of the existing interpretation of Castellanos' "feminist" writings.

The erasing of the man's cognition and, ultimately, the erasing of his role as protagonist in the storylines cast doubt upon the validity of reading these works

at face value. The danger of a limited perspective (men-owners, women-slaves) that is often employed in “black and white” readings of Rosario Castellanos’ works is that such a limited perspective protects the traditional gender dichotomy and prevents the change of roles. Typecasting men and women restricts the scope of gender perspective and thus ultimately reduces the feminist agenda to conforming to the existing roles and imposes an artificial division into “men’s” and “women’s” issues. According to Victoria Sendón, “lo que se llama perspectiva de género es una pérdida de tiempo [...]. No, la mujer debe hablar de economía, no de lo que antes hacían las monjas. [...] Los temas de las mujeres deben ser todos” (cited in Enciso 2002).

Rather than being examples of “traditional” feminist writing, the three stories adopt an overtly anti-feminist stance in order to show women that they themselves are responsible for perceiving themselves as the objects of men’s manipulation. In other words, the collection of stories posits that women have put themselves in the position of victims by adhering to traditional roles. Moreover, they insist that men also adhere to the role that women assign them. Consequently, both men and women find themselves trapped in the traditional structure of relationships, a vicious circle that women are unwilling to leave and men are unable to destroy.

NOTES

- 1 Maslow defines “instinctoid” needs as primal needs within the human context; in other words, these needs are physiological and therefore are to be met before a human can function on a higher cognitive level. While instinctoid needs are similar to pure physiological needs, they are weaker in their expression because humans experience them within the boundaries of a powerful culture; unlike animal instincts, instinctoids can disappear under certain external social conditions (see Maslow 1970: 103).
- 2 Although Tom Ryan’s view, as well as the study by Metcalf and Humphries, have been widely criticized for their narrow perspective and potentially colonialist overtones (see Middleton 1992: 125), the underlying reasoning (psychoanalytic in nature) is applicable to the analysis of Castellanos’ stories because of the continuously reappearing theme of the symbolism of parenthood in Latin American culture. For example, in Octavio Paz’s examination of Mexican nation as “los hijos de La Malinche”, familial bonds are seen as the strongest influence on identity formation (see Paz 2008 (1950): 88-107).
- 3 Edith’s hobby in itself can be viewed as a metaphor for masturbation; see Carpenter 2000 for a more detailed analysis.

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