

## **Female Characterization in Laura Restrepo's *La multitude errante***

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### **Introduction**

Although the first edition of *Las desobedientes*, by María Mercedes Jaramillo and Betty Osorio published in 1997 predates the relatively recent breadth of Laura Restrepo's (b. 1950) critical acclaim, some remarks in their introduction are applicable to certain aspects of Restrepo's body of work:

*El presente libro recoge biografías que rescatan el devenir histórico y el quehacer existencial de algunas mujeres hispanoamericanas que marcaron su momento y su medio por haberse enfrentado a las reglas establecidas o a las injusticias sociales que las marginaban u oprimían como individuos, o a sus familias y comunidades. (Jaramillo and Osorio XXI)*

This analysis will show how Restrepo artfully combines features of conventionality while at the same time breaking new ground in her portrayal of women in conflict.

### **Biographical Data on the Author:**

Although this study is primarily focused on Laura Restrepo's depiction of women, a glance at her background provides evidence of her complicated relationship to the status quo at any given moment. This tendency of hers to question and navigate power is reflected in her

writing. She worked as an investigative journalist, and although her work incorporates this, her writing spans other genres such as literary criticism and children's literature. According to [http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/r/restrepo\\_laura.htm](http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/r/restrepo_laura.htm), in 1983, she was elected by the Colombian government to form part of a commission that was to negotiate with the M-19 movement. This experience formed the basis for her work, *Historia de un entusiasmo*, which was published three years later. After its publication, Laura Restrepo lived in exile in Mexico and Spain for five years because she had received death threats. She was able to maintain contacts with the M-19 during her time in exile, until the group disarmed as a guerilla movement in 1989. In 2004, she was appointed director of the Instituto de Cultura y Turismo de Santafé de Bogotá.

***La multitud errante:***

In her novel *La multitud errante* (2001), Restrepo portrays the violence of forced displacement and homelessness yet at the same time there exists within that framework of relentless violence a tender story about the attraction between a foreign educated woman and a humble Colombian man. The depiction of many characteristics of the ongoing civil conflict in twentieth and twenty-first century Colombia is so vivid that, in spite of being a work of fiction, even readers who are not familiar with that period of history can come away with some notion of what took place. The author achieves this by contrasting a multilayered insider and outsider's view. This also results in a varied testimony of the daily life and many of the numerous struggles of *los desplazados*. These hardships can range from the practical such as the procurement of food or other essential supplies to affective needs.

Restrepo's narrator (whose name is never revealed), is a foreigner who is both an observer and a participant as the events unfold, and she experiences and recounts a

consciousness of her own otherness as well as that of her love interest, a character the reader knows as Siete por Tres. It bears mention that Siete por Tres is a nickname that was attributed to the character on account of his extra toe. Whereas an extra toe could theoretically form the basis for feeling stigmatized, in a situation of political persecution, it is a clearly identifiable characteristic, and this takes on even greater meaning when one is pursued by the authorities. In addition to being a target of identification because of his congenital anomaly, Siete por Tres is doubly stigmatized because he was abandoned as a newborn. According to the sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982), there are noteworthy distinctions between visible and invisible stigmas. Goffman's theories about stigma still capture scholars' attention. Lozano Maneiro's work in this realm is particularly exceptional.

### **Ignoring Differences of Social Class:**

The differences in background between the narrator, who Siete por Tres nicknames Ojos de Agua in clear allusion to her light eye color, are not an impediment to her attraction to him. In fact, it might be said that it is quite the opposite: his otherness is oddly seductive. In addition to this romantic story, there is a political backdrop, as the foreign female narrator learns firsthand what the Colombian turmoil has done to the man she desires and loves. The lyricism within the condition of tragedy calls to mind another love story, *Espagne, premier amour* (1968) written by Vladimir Pozner (1905-1992). Pozner's novel portrays one man's life long obsession with Pilar, a woman he meets while she is fleeing the civil war in Spain (1936-1939).

### ***Espagne, premier amour***

Although there is a dearth of critical information about *Espagne, premier amour*, Pozner's novel about a frenchman's lifelong love and obsession with a Spanish woman named

Pilar was, according to a 2005 article authored by François Eychart in *Cultures*, widely praised by Louis Aragon (1897-1982), the French Communist political activist known for his poetry, novels and essays. Unfortunately, Eychart does not footnote the source of the quote. It is known that Pozner wrote in several languages, and lived in many countries, among them the United States, where he worked in the film industry during the McCarthy years. Pozner's novel is related by a male narrator who is working in the Concentration Camps for Spanish refugees in France, which is a part of the war that until recently had been widely ignored.

The “premier amour” described in the novel is that of Pierre Guette, and the young Spanish refugee Pilar, who is only sixteen years old. Pierre was a young painter who had been living in a dormitory for fishermen on the Mediterranean Coast in 1939, when, terrified as a result of a bombing, suddenly finds himself on a boat with Spanish refugees heading for France. He introduces himself to the narrator, who needs a translator. In the midst of the crowds of refugees, Pierre meets Pilar, and spends slightly over a day with her. They spend the night together in a makeshift tent made out of his canvasses in the sand. When he wakes up, she is gone, and he spends all of his energy trying to locate her again. His determination to reunite with her is so great that he even arranges to get himself confined in a refugee camp for this purpose. The novel is an expression of the dual loves- for Pilar and for Spain. The reality of the novel finds itself in the acutely realized anguish of Pierre's search for Pilar, and thus for his adopted and lost homeland. Pilar has become a romanticized and unattainable ideal, while Pierre remains grounded in a reality based dimension. In Restrepo's novel, the female narrator is the one who is in total contact with reality, and it is the male who spends his time in a fruitless search for the woman who reared him, and with whom he is completely obsessed.

### **Women in Conflict:**

Before embarking on further commentary about Restrepo's female characterization, it is useful to place the characterization of women in conflict into a context. The most traditional portrait of women in wars involves a complete separation of the home and battle fronts, and no comingling of the two. Therefore, in this paradigm, women are depicted as carrying out non-combatant roles for the most part. Furthermore, this model perpetuates the idea that women are restricted from the dangerous, violent spaces of combat and political upheaval, and are therefore bound to, or take refuge in the home. It has been said that the first conflict to burst asunder these clearly drawn boundaries was the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Perhaps the most widely known representation of this phenomenon of fusing home and battle fronts is *Guernica*. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) recognized on a deep-seated level that there was no gap between the home and battle fronts in the Spanish Civil War, and therefore, the conventional military/civilian distinctions were also completely erased.

Restrepo perpetuates the model of danger present everywhere and for everyone in the Colombian conflict. Although the author does not provide exact dates in *La multitude errante*, there are certain clues as to when the events were taking place. It is unfortunate that some half century after the onset of hostilities in the Spanish Civil War, Restrepo's novel portrays undefended civilians who are trying to escape from the ravages of military force used against them on a daily basis. It could be said that there is no home front per se in this novel. Home is always portrayed as something temporary and to some extent, quite fleeting. Restrepo's nod to conventionality is that her female narrator waits for her love in a temporary dwelling which one hesitates to call home; however, it is the female waiting for the male to return from battle, albeit not a battle defined in the traditional sense.

If Ojos de Agua appears to be traditional, a more profound look at Restrepo's treatment of her reveals that in spite of her reluctance to express her feelings directly to Siete por Tres, she does clearly articulate her commitment to work, and indeed works throughout the novel. It is not an exaggeration to say that she has a professional identity. For example, although she desires Siete por Tres madly, when she catches herself daydreaming and is on the verge of expressing her sentiments towards him, she makes it clear to the reader that she must go back to carry out the work that is to be done. "*Sonaron las campanas llamando a misa de seis y yo supe que había dejado escapar el momento...los soplos asmáticos del ventilador sucumbieron ante la entrada de la masa espesa de luz, y yo tuve que volar a cumplir con mis tareas del desayuno.*" (Restrepo 135)

#### **Other Female Characters in *La multitud errante***

Although the narrator takes up much physical and emotional space in the novel, there are other female characters in *La multitud errante* that deserve mention. One of these is the narrator's rival for most of the novel, Matilde Lina. Just as Siete por Tres' biological mother abandoned him, Matilde Lina never abandons him until circumstances force them apart. What we know about Matilde Lina is that she does not adhere to strictly defined boundaries and is an amalgam of a maternal figure and a lover. This characterization is a departure from tradition as it breaks taboos. If Siete por Tres' biological mother could be described as either an unwilling mother or one who rejects her child on account of his extra toe, it could also be said that the narrator is a frustrated non-mother. We know this because she tells us so at the end of the novel. "*Le hablé...de los hijos que nunca he tenido; de mi afición por escribir todo lo que acontece.*" (Restrepo 134) In addition to Ojos de Agua and Matilde Lina, there is the enigmatic character known as La Madre Françoise, and there is Perpetua, too. A case could also be made that there is

a female character that is presented in non-human form: the virgin Siete por Tres carries around with him for much of the novel. That object underscores the forced displacement and homelessness that Restrepo describes throughout the novel. According to her, this was the purpose of writing a novel of this nature.

**Conclusion:**

Creo que no hay duda: el gran drama de nuestro tiempo, la marca que nos caracteriza, es el desplazamiento, la emigración, la marginación de los emigrados, la inclemencia de las fronteras, el peregrinaje de quienes huyen del hambre y la violencia. Lo cual implica un doble recorrido. Por un lado el exterior, por territorio extraño, por tierras donde eres extranjero. Por otro lado el viaje interior, la exploración de tu propia intimidad. Una novela de desplazamiento a la que falte esta segunda dimensión, se te queda en sociología del fenómeno.

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