

Wretched Childhood

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Abstract

In narrative written by women in Mexico, childhood is referred to from a raw and non-idyllic perspective. Mostly represented by girls, childhood alludes to stark, violent worlds, mired in abandonment, despondency, and loneliness. In this context, Brenda Navarro's novel Casas Vacías adds to this chorus of female voices who see in childhood a barren and baffling place that emotionally hurts little ones. This work analyzes this novel from a gender perspective, with the aim of enriching the landscape of literature written by women.

Keywords: Childhood, Motherhood, Narrative, Female writers, Mexico

Childhood is one of the recurring topics in the Mexican narrative written by women. Since the first publications, from Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* [*Cartridge*] (1931), to Elena Garro's "La semana de colores" [*The Week of Colors*] (1964), the crystalline gaze of girls and boys serves as a filter to either portray the cruelty of reality or to explain such coarseness:

the childhood these women talk about is full of anguish and threats. It is not exactly paradise and, more than a lost stage, it is something that was never quite there, which was only suggested as a possibility.

The condition of fragility related to that timeless age is transferred by the characters to their way of speaking and behaving. It is linked to a primary logic of sin and punishment. (Espinasa, 2015, p. 261)

In addition, childhood is related to the search of origins, so, in "many of the literary works [...] the childish gaze is portrayed from different perspectives, for instance, childhood related to an idyllic world, sometimes considered as a moment of abandonment and lonesomeness, and sometimes considered as a true hell." (Madrid Moctezuma, 2003, p. 38)

Under this perspective, this work analyzes Brenda Navarro's novel, *Casas vacías* [*Empty Houses*] (1982), where childhood is represented in its most vulnerable aspects, in so far adults will manage to make this stage of life miserable for a girl and an autistic boy. In the novel, the children will be subdued to the whims and obsessions of their elders. As a result, suffering pierces them at an early age and makes them victims of violence and psychologic abuse.

Mexican female writers on the subject of childhood

As noted, childhood is a recurring topic in the work of Mexican female writers. Addressed from different angles and perspectives, Mexican female writers: "have consolidated a series of characters, boys and girls, who convey to us the conviction that childhood is not always and only the sweet haven of innocence, purity and happiness. In these pages of the Mexican narrative, we have seen the pain of orphanage, child cruelty and the heavy burden of the transition towards adolescence emerge." (Gutiérrez de Velasco y Domenella, 1996, p. 25)

Thus, we find a non-idyllic nor naive approach to childhood, since female authors such as Inés Arredondo or Amparo Dávila immerse their girl characters in a series of tense, unkind and unpleasant situations that makes them mature inopportunely or places them before violent scenarios that leaves them both physical and psychological marks: "[In Inés Arredondo's work] The girls who are protagonists live in hostile, cruel, grotesque worlds. They experience abandonment from their beloved and indifferent paternal figures, as well as absent and unfamiliar maternal figures; the feeling of abandonment is recurring." (Martínez Zalce, 1996, p. 284).

Being a child, but above all being a girl, entails a double marginalization condition as, on the one hand, they are silenced in multiple ways, ignoring their emotional needs, while, on the other hand, they suffer from gender

discrimination that forces them to undertake traditionally assigned roles. Therefore, being a girl means diving into a dark zone which is impossible to leave on their own, having to withstand dreadful situations: “These girls [in Arredondo’s work] are unhappy. As mythical heroes, [...] they must act their own tragedies so that they can tell them later. [...] Chores are inherited as a curse, so, there is no possibility of acknowledging their houses as their homes, nor their parents as providers and protectors; as a matter of fact, their family life is some sort of hell.” (Martínez Zalce, 1996, p. 284)

While these features are pointed out by Graciela Martínez Zalce making reference to Inés Arredondo’s work, I consider that such features can be extended, in general, to the narrative of Mexican female writers, since while reviewing the texts of Amparo Davila, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, Carmen Boullosa, Myriam Moscona, Cecilia Eudave, Guadalupe Ángeles, Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny, Socorro Venegas, Guadalupe Nettel, Brenda Navarro, Laia Jufresa, and Verónica Gerber, among others, we find the presence of girls and boys who suffer several forms of abandonment and violence from their parents, grandparents, and other adults who are responsible for them. Consequently, childhood is not an ideal or safe place to return to in their memories, but a space marked by aggressions, the excessive supervision of adults or carelessness. This depiction of childhood yet again confronts us with an abyss, with the darkness of incomprehension in a cruel and ruthless world. The girls and boys who inhabit these spaces live immersed in the conflicting and chaotic situations and ties created by the adults and, despite all this framework of pain and suffering, they never lose their innocence, sometimes on the verge of naivety.

Under such circumstances, being a girl or a boy does not prevent them from suffering anxiety, anguish, fear, melancholy, nostalgia, anger, frustration, and other negative feelings caused by their surroundings; yet, despite these universes full of gloom and unease, it is precisely thanks to childhood that they manage to escape depression. We could say their childish condition contributes to these worlds being lived more pleasantly, since innocence, typical of this life stage, allows them to overcome their difficulties and conflicts in a more positive or less tragic way, transforming them into more resilient girls and boys, while they manage to face difficulties with greater optimism than adults. Thus, girls and boys become some sort of witness to the events, despite suffering directly or indirectly the aggressions of adults. While we can witness how girls and boys overcome such harsh experiences, it is still to be acknowledged that all these situations leave marks on both their physical and emotional bodies. So, as readers, we are certain that sooner or later such marks will somehow appear in their adult lives, although, for now, we only observe the resilience that allows them to move forward and outlive the chaos around them. Hence, in Amparo Davila’s work, childhood becomes something that is never overcome and, therefore, yearned for, even when returning to it results in a painless abyss (Cf. Pitol, 1996, p. 286).

Likewise, childhood will be referred to as a means towards the search of identity and, therefore, building a more mature self, with better resources to circumvent the adversities of adult life. This trend, present in Mexican literature of the 20th century, will be more referred to by female than by male authors, and girl protagonists will also have a higher prevalence over boy protagonists. We could suggest that this is because, for women, the search of identity is a continuing need due to the poor visibility they have been subjected to, not only in the artistic-literary discourse, but also in the socio-cultural speech. In this way, female writers try to subvert the limited presence of women in literature, childhood being one of the most frequent ways to offset that misrepresentation. Be as it may, female writers have put forward a noteworthy topic to the modern and postmodern subject, contributing to a more complex, comprehensive, and profound reflection: “It is striking that, after Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho* (1931) and *Las manos de mamá [Mom’s hands]* (1937), most of these texts are women’s work which have girls for protagonists, even in such “masculine” contexts as the Mexican Revolution, addressed by Campobello.” (Pfeiffer, 2002, p. 133)

Childhood, thus presented, is not considered an idyllic place, nor a haven of peace and continuous happiness, and this is resumed by Brenda Navarro in her novel *Casas vacías [Empty houses]*, which is discussed below.

Houses full of absence

Brenda Navarro (1982) holds a degree in Sociology and Feminist Economy from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). She holds a Specialization in Human Rights from Universidad Iberoamericana and in Gender Relations from PUEG/UNAM. She completed a master’s degree in Gender Studies, Women and Citizenship at the University of Barcelona, and she has worked at several NGOs related to human rights. Her lines of research relate to labor rights and female writer’s use of time, as well as women’s access to culture, digital rights and humanities, and the construction of identities within the fields of power of the publishing industry.

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The novel, *Casas vacías*, tells the story of two women and their relationship with motherhood, which, by the way, is experienced with ups and downs, as both characters must assume their role according to what is established by society. Obsessed with her desire to become a mother, and before her couple's lack of interest to get her pregnant, the coprotagonist of the story decides to kidnap the protagonist's son to fulfill her dream of starting a family. In this way, the lives of the two women clash, without the second woman knowing of the existence of the first one, since they belong to different social strata. Being mothers to the same son (first named Daniel and then renamed Leonel), both women go through the pain of loss, since, at the end, the child is taken away from the kidnapper's arms and vanishes. The only thing that remains from Daniel/Leonel is the recollection of his existence in the memory of both women and in the child's objects that are treasured by them both.

In the novel, Daniel/Leonel is a boy with autism who expresses his emotions stridently, with repetitive moves. However, he manages to interact with Nagore (niece of the protagonist's husband, Fran) and to engage in a somewhat stable manner with his mother and father, but not with strangers. Daniel/Leonel is born in Spain because his father is originally from there. When his sister is murdered by her husband, practically in front of their daughter, Fran decides to travel to Spain, not only to attend to his sister's funeral, but also to adopt Nagore as his own daughter, because he wants to take care of the little girl, as his parents (the girl's grandparents) are old, and he considers they will not be able to take care of the girl as they should. Thus, while in that country, the protagonist gives birth to Daniel/Leonel, and must wait a few months before they can travel back to Mexico, despite the grandparent's recriminations for separating them from their granddaughter after their daughter's death. Nagore's father, for his part, is taken to prison and sentenced to serve many years, since he himself confesses being the perpetrator of the crime.

In this way, we observe the first instance of a violent episode that will mark Nagore's six-year-old psyche, and that will entail consequences when she becomes an adult, since no one cares about providing psychological attention to her, or even providing her with enough emotional support to overcome her trauma. On the contrary, it would seem that adults, especially the protagonist, are immersed in their own internal conflicts and, above all, the protagonist is mired in an extramarital relationship, since in her marriage the relationship with her husband is rather distant and cold. Therefore, Nagore is treated with indifference and even with some contempt, since she is not that close to Fran, and the protagonist never fully accepts her as an adoptive daughter, either because she has a son of her own or because she feels she was given a burden that she did not choose and for which she must assume the responsibilities of motherhood. In such sense, the protagonist does not perform the traditional gender roles. Instead, she places herself (if we take those roles into account) outside the norm by rejecting the motherhood imposed to her. The protagonist rejects Nagore without disguise. She makes her feel unwelcome to her world, even though the girl gets along with Daniel/Leonel and even helps to take care of the little one, as she manages to put him to sleep and keep him calm and happy with her attentions: "It was the first time I touched her [Nagore] and that I put her to sleep in her bedroom, and it was also the first time she sang a lullaby to Daniel, who fell asleep." (Navarro, 2019: 84)

But, what about Nagore? How does she overcome these conflicts and what is her resilience capacity before such extremely tragic events in her life? We will address these points in the next section.

Lost childhood

As seen above, Nagore will suffer a sad childhood, uprooted from her homeland and family, always walking under the shadow of her mother's murder (Amara) committed by her own father (Xavi). Nagore does not get to decide who to go with, nor who to stay with, as it will be adults who always impose their decisions, without even asking her opinion, her point of view or at least how she feels. Therefore, Nagore becomes a manageable girl, for she does not resist such decisions, but accepts them with reluctance and even fear, without questioning or rejecting them. Thus, Nagore becomes a manipulable girl who, nonetheless, will become a resilient woman, as she will be able to face the most extreme situations from her apparent passivity.

But first, let us start by understanding the lack of love she suffers from the protagonist. As already mentioned, the protagonist accompanies her husband on his trip to Spain after learning about the terrible news of his sister's murder. The protagonist, who was supposed to go on this trip for only few days, ends up living a few months there and becoming the adoptive mother of her husband's niece. This imposition of motherhood entails a feeling of rejection towards the girl, since this was an unwanted and unplanned situation, thus starting a tense and conflicting relationship between the two of them. Albeit the protagonist was already pregnant when adopting Nagore, awaiting the birth of her firstborn, this does not mean that she agrees to be the mother of a six-year-old girl whom she does not know, for she had never seen nor spoken to her before. Her husband forcing this situation upon her illustrates a chauvinist and patriarchal behavior, since Fran never discusses with his wife the possibility of adoption. He does not even discuss this with his parents, but unilaterally decides what he considers best for all, especially for him. Later in the text, when Daniel/Leonel desperately cries to get her attention, the protagonist refers to this behavior as an act typical of men who tend to impose their point of view and who make themselves heard at all costs. It is thus, therefore, that Fran represents the male gender in its traditional version, and forces Nagore and his wife into a relationship that is clearly doomed to failure, since neither of them manage to understand the other. So, we could say the protagonist rebels against this imposition in a silent but non subtle way,

since at first, when Nagore demonstrates her need for affection by being with her all the time, the protagonist responds with rejection that borders on negligence. The protagonist responds unsatisfyingly to the motherhood forced upon her and, because of this rejection, it could be said that she refuses to exercise traditional motherhood, which results in her being misplaced and, consequently, seen in the eyes of the reader as a bad mother.

In fact, if we abide by the characteristics of traditional motherhood, we will observe that the protagonist never expresses her desire to become a mother and, in that sense, she does not express her “maternal instinct” towards Nagore either. Being outside the stereotype of the good mother, the protagonist becomes a bad mother to Nagore and, as we will appreciate later, also to Daniel/Leonel, as she will not be able to take care of the child of her womb either. The protagonist does not conform to gender normativity and, while escaping such normativity, she bursts violently into the lives of the little ones, particularly in the life of Nagore who, by the way, will air her grievances to the protagonist, in actions and words, for her lack of attention and affection. Nagore-woman would have known how to overcome adversity (a virtue the protagonist admires), thus demonstrating her resilience. Nonetheless, in the meantime, Nagore-girl will have no choice but to grudgingly adapt to her uncle-father’s rules and survive the protagonist’s emotional carelessness. Nagore-girl will forge herself amidst the chaotic and heartrending adult world: “You have to learn to take care of yourself, I told her [Nagore]. That’s right. I won’t be like my mom. I’m going to live. Her thin lips filled with truth.” (Navarro, 2019, p. 82)

Therefore, Nagore’s childhood will translate into a lost childhood, as she will have to face situations such as the tragic death of her mother, being forcedly separated from her father, the protagonist’s incomprehension, the remoteness of her uncle-father, and the detachment from her homeland. As a teenager, and especially as a young adult, Nagore will end up by imposing her wish to return to her homeland and reunite with her father (who is still in prison), as she looks forward to recovering her family ties to recompose her identity. In light of the second tragedy, the abduction of Daniel/Leonel, Nagore will have to overcome another painful separation and accommodate into her life a feeling of emptiness that never fills up. Nagore-woman will air her grievances, just as she did as a child, for the unforgivable neglect of the protagonist when losing Daniel/Leonel and will even hit the protagonist in an act of violence, venting all her frustration, anger and resentment accumulated over the years. If Nagore-child is forced to stay in a country and home she hates, Nagore-woman will stubbornly outline her own destiny, away from her uncle-father and the protagonist, by returning “home” where her father and grandparents live. In this way, the detachment she achieves fills her with greater strength and courage to build a path of her own, where the past becomes an engine that drives her to become a better woman, with sense of agency, instead of preventing her from moving on. As already mentioned, this virtue will eventually be admired by the protagonist, acknowledging that Nagore is a woman different from her mother and herself and, therefore, she will be able to live a happier and fuller life: “Perhaps it was her youth or the loss of her innocence at such a young age. Whatever it was, I could see before my belligerent wall a woman who plowed her way through the rubble.” (Navarro, 2019: 118)

Stolen childhood

Now let us move on to the case of Daniel/Leonel and his disappearance, the central subject of the novel. So far, we have discussed Nagore and her conflictive relationship with the protagonist. Now, let us focus on Daniel/Leonel, an autistic three-year-old boy who is kidnapped by a young woman who sales chocolate popsicles, cakes, and jellies.

As noted earlier, Daniel/Leonel is born in Spain, where his first weeks of life unfold. His mother, the protagonist of the story, begins to struggle with his care, since he cries continuously and desperately, situation that leads his mother to offer him her breast, not as an act of love, but as an attempt to suffocate the baby’s exasperating behavior. Thus, we gradually notice that the protagonist does not practice acts of attention and care out of unconditional love, but as selfish actions, as she does them only to reach the state of calmness she needs: “Daniel caused me a type of discomfort I could not deal with. I used to take him in my arms and while making shhh, shhhh, shhh, to soothe myself, I forced him to suck on my nipple, not for him to feed, just to keep him busy so that he stopped getting to my nerves with his piercing weeping.” (Navarro, 2019, p. 80)

Daniel/Leonel’s mom begins the relationship with her son in an untraditional way and we will observe that detachment will continue to happen as time goes by, leading to the tragedy that will mark her life forever. Likewise, the relationship between Fran and Daniel/Leonel will not be warm nor affectionate as, once the child is diagnosed with autism, Fran will pull further away from him. Consequently, we observe emotional estrangement from both parents, a fact that will have an impact on the cognitive and emotional development of the child when deprived from the psycho-emotional learning process that a healthy proximity with the parents provide. Daniel/Leonel will become short-tempered and erratic and, where it not for Nagore, who manages to bond with the little boy, he would have been casted adrift without being able to relate to anyone. The emotional abandonment he is a victim of is dampened by Nagore’s presence and, thanks to her, Daniel/Leonel manages to act at times in a stable and even happy manner:

[...] we saw that Daniel did not misshape the world, already unpleasant. On the contrary, he lit it up, he specially lit up Nagore, who enjoyed chasing after him to make him laugh. That was

Nagore's purpose: making my son laugh. And Daniel's fate was to outshine his sister. Watching them get along amidst the unknown crowd, with the ease of those who enjoy, encouraged us to throw a party for our son to celebrate his third birthday. (Navarro, 2019, pp. 134-135)

Although it is true that there are some moments of joy and happiness in Daniel/Leonel's relationship with his parents, it is also true that their carelessness, especially that of his mother, leads to the child's disappearance. On his part, Fran never pursues building solid affective bonds with his son, nor assume a more loving fatherhood. As for the protagonist, she gets distracted at the park to answer a call from Vladimir, her lover. As a result, the mother is deemed responsible and guilty for Daniel/Leonel's disappearance, as she was the boy's primary caregiver; however, the father is accountable as well, as he leaves everything on the protagonist's hands. Once more, we observe Fran's chauvinist and patriarchal nature, and the lack of acceptance of the traditional gender role by the protagonist. Feeling extremely guilty for her lack of attention for being distracted by her lover's call, she will receive Fran's and Nagore's strong recriminations without hesitation, both at the time of Daniel/Leonel's disappearance, and in the future, when Nagore strives to separate from them and return to Spain. Since that moment on, the protagonist will plunge into a severe depression that will practically lead her to inaction, ending up surrounded by dirty dishes and watching TV. Nagore struggles to get out from this chaos until reaching her goal, leaving Fran and the protagonist immersed in deep sorrow.

But, what about Daniel/Leonel while all of this happens? As noted, the boy is kidnapped by a young woman who sells chocolate popsicles, cakes, and jellies. The coprotagonist kidnaps him from the park located in front of the building where the family lives and where his mother used to take him every afternoon. The coprotagonist sees Daniel/Leonel for the first time at a children's party where she was selling her merchandise, and then meets him again when his mother hires her for Daniel/Leonel's three-year birthday party. The coprotagonist will again become fascinated by the boy, feeling attracted to his beauty. Once she places him, she starts going to the park often; as her obsession to become a mother increases, and since her couple (Rafael) does not get her pregnant, she starts having serious thoughts on kidnapping the child. So, taking advantage of his mother's distraction, she takes Daniel/Leonel and puts him in a cab to take him home with her. The boy, in shock, cries calling for Nagore without his mother noticing, for she was caught up in the call. The mother's lack of attention will become apparent when she is questioned about what happened, thus reinforcing the bad mother reputation:

[...] Did anyone take him? No, I don't know. Didn't you see anyone around? No, or probably yes, there were a lot of people. And you didn't see anything strange? No. And the boy, did he yell? No, he didn't. Are you sure? No. What were you doing in the meantime? Because you must have been doing something not to be by your son's side. I was by my son's side, but he was playing... With whom? By himself, he was alone. Mmmh, ok... Did you take care of him by yourself, did you love him? What do you mean if I loved him? He was my son! Mmmh, ok... wait over there. (Navarro, 2019, p. 115)

Daniel/Leonel, being not only a boy, but an autistic boy, is subject to adult's whims and desires to such extent that he ends up being separated from the coprotagonist, this time disappearing forever. The first time, when taken away from his family, he is taken to live with the coprotagonist who suffers from violence inflicted by Rafael. While Daniel/Leonel is not physically abused or assaulted, watching fights and beatings lead him to autistic-inherent reactions, like screaming relentlessly or swaying nonstop. These behaviors, among others, accentuate as time goes by, forcing the coprotagonist to seek medical attention for the boy, which confirms the boy's autism diagnose. As the story moves forward and the violent relationship of the protagonist with Rafael aggravates, Daniel/Leonel gradually loses progress in his development to such extent that the only word he continuously repeats is "ore", calling desperately for Nagore. Naturally, the coprotagonist does not understand and although in the end she is able to create an incipient bond with him, his setback and communication skills impairment are evident: "[...] beating and yelling truly freak Leonel out. [...] he giggled and then said his typical *ore*" (Navarro, 2019, pp. 56, 57)

In this adverse environment, Daniel/Leonel survives, and, at times, manages to be calm and even enjoy few moments being around the coprotagonist. However, this apparent calmness is once more disrupted when the coprotagonist's mother kidnaps him. Abandoned by Rafael, and everyone knowing she abducted the child to form a family, both her mother and Rafael's relatives decide to keep her from the child, but instead of giving the boy back to his parents, who are looking for him, they make him disappear. Not knowing where they have taken him, the mental health of the coprotagonist becomes more fragile, so she ends up fleeing after an attempt to turn herself in to the authorities. Thus, Daniel/Leonel disappears permanently in hands of the adults who could not, did not know or did not want to take care of him: "But Leonel was not there, and would no longer be, nor with me, nor with his mother, not in this life, nor in another. Where is Leonel, what did they do to him, what happened to him?" (Navarro, 2019, p. 157)

Conclusion

In her novel *Casas vacías*, Brenda Navarro introduces us to a wretched childhood. The story, which is not recounted in the form of memories or remembrance, but from the female narrators-characters perspective, talks about the psychological and emotional abuse suffered by two children in hands of adults. Without having sense of agency, the little ones are subject to the desires, obsessions, and whims of adults. Despite the chaotic world that surrounds them, the girl manages to overcome her traumatic experiences by developing a strong resilience. The boy, conversely, being younger and suffering from autism is disappeared, leading to an open ending, and leaving a sense of void impossible to heal due to his absence.

Henceforth, childhood is not seen as an idyllic stage of life. Instead, it is portrayed as traumatic and horrible, so, Brenda Navarro adds to a raw perspective of this stage of life, which contributes to a more complex representation of childhood in Mexico. Being subdued to the will of the adults, her characters, girl and boy, react to that violent environment in the same way, but failing to improve their situation. Consequently, wretched childhood adds up to this topic, so-frequently discussed by Mexican female writers, undoubtedly enriching the vast panorama of literature in Mexico.

Works Citation

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