

## **Masculine Domination Devices Reflected in Buenos Aires Literature Between 1928 and 1942: Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes Porteñas*.**

### ***Dispositivos de dominación masculina reflejados en la literatura porteña entre 1928 y 1942: Las Aguafuertes Porteñas de Roberto Arlt.***

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#### **Abstract**

This work aims to analyze the masculine domination devices reflected in Buenos Aires literature between 1928 and 1942 as a way to visualize the reality of women in the city of Buenos Aires. For this purpose, we will work with the aguafuertes porteñas collection entitled *Aguafuertes porteñas. Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana* that brings together chronicles of Roberto Arlt published in *El Mundo* newspaper between 1928 and 1942. In the introduction we will briefly discuss some theoretical issues of gender studies in order to establish how masculine domination is produced. Our journey will begin with the perspective of Simone De Beauvoir regarding the education of women following the vision of Pierre Bourdieu, who addresses the mechanisms of masculine domination and the concept of symbolic capital. We will conclude with Judith Butler and her analysis of gender as a cultural way of configuring the body. Next, we will analyze the different representations of masculine domination devices that we find in Arlt's chronicles, marriage being the main exponent. Furthermore, the cultural framework in which these texts are produced will be delimited, which exposes a normative framework of the social practices of the time. Finally, a brief conclusion of the analyzed topic will be presented.

**Key Words:** gender studies, feminism, Argentinian Literature.

#### **Resumen**

*Este trabajo se propone analizar los dispositivos de dominación masculina reflejados en la literatura porteña entre 1928 y 1942 como modo de visibilización de la realidad femenina en la ciudad de Buenos Aires. Para ello hemos tomado la colección de aguafuertes porteñas titulada Aguafuertes porteñas. Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana que reúne crónicas de Roberto Arlt publicadas en el diario El Mundo entre 1928 y 1942. En la introducción discutiremos brevemente algunas cuestiones teóricas de estudios de género. Nuestro recorrido se iniciará con la perspectiva de Simone De Beauvoir en cuanto a la formación de las mujeres siguiendo con la visión de Pierre Bourdieu, quien se ocupa de los mecanismos de dominación masculina y del concepto de capital simbólico, para concluir con Judith Butler y su análisis del género*

*como forma cultural de configurar el cuerpo. Luego analizaremos las distintas representaciones de los dispositivos de dominación masculina que encontramos en las crónicas de Arlt, el matrimonio como principal exponente. Asimismo, se delimitará el marco cultural en el que estos textos son producidos, que exponen un marco normativo de las prácticas sociales de la época. Finalmente, se expondrá una breve conclusión del tema analizado.*

**Palabras clave:** Estudios de género, feminismos, literatura argentina.

## Introduction

Women of today are overthrowing the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence concretely; but their success in living their human condition completely does not come easily. As they are brought up by women, in the heart of a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still subordinates them to men from a practical point of view; virile prestige is far from being eradicated: it still stands on solid economic and social bases. It is thus necessary to study woman's traditional destiny carefully. What I will try to describe is how women are taught to assume their condition, how they experience this, what universe they find themselves enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted (...) Only then we will be able to understand what problems women are faced with. (De Beauvoir, 2006, p.205)

These lines are the introduction to the fourth part of *The Second Sex*, in which Simone De Beauvoir depicts the education of women. The author establishes in this section that women are not born as such but are shaped into women through different institutions and devices which perpetuate the masculine domination. Thus, no biological, psychic or economic destiny defines the figure of women, that product qualified as feminine. In the same line of thought, Pierre Bourdieu (2015) establishes that the biological issues come to the arena to reinforce the androcentric construction of the feminine because it is not the necessity of the biological reproduction what determines the symbolic organization of the sexual division and, progressively, the whole natural and social order, but it is a social arbitrary construction on a biological basis, specially of the body, masculine

and feminine, their traditions and functions, what gives apparently natural basis to the androcentric vision of the social order. For this reason, that androcentric view "legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction." (p. 37). Judith Butler (2012) agrees with Bourdieu's point of view and adds that it is necessary to understand gender from a historical point of view, that is to say, gender is a cultural way of body configuration which is continually open to change. It is clear then that "anatomy" (the biological issues according to Bourdieu) and "sex" (the psychic issues according to De Beauvoir) do not exist without a cultural framework. Therefore, the attribution of femininity to feminine bodies as if it was a natural feature exists into the normative frame in which the assignment of femininity is a mechanism to produce gender and domination.<sup>1</sup>

We will analyze in this work how the domination mechanisms which create the naturalized and normalized vision of femininity are represented in the compilation of Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes Porteñas* made by Silvia Saítta entitled *Aguafuertes porteñas. Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana*. In her compilation, Saítta organizes the texts into two groups presenting two macrotexts delimited not only by *paratextual* and *peritextual* devices<sup>2</sup> but also by the themes that each group depicts. In the first group, the reader will find texts which depict the habits and customs of Buenos Aires locals so that they can build the cultural framework of the theme we intend to analyze. In the second group, the reader will find chronicles exclusively focused on the relationship between men and women into the marriage institution which was the most important masculine domination device at that time. These two groups also integrate spreading out a bigger macrotext which will offer the reader a better idea of the idiosyncrasy of the metropolis during the decades from 1920

to 1940 and the role of women in this historical framework.

### **Buenos Aires, The Modern Metropolis**

As it was pointed out in our introduction, the texts of the first group in our edition depict Buenos Aires local customs and habits which Arlt was interested in. These texts fluctuate between cartographic and temporal descriptions of the city and the description of the characters who inhabit it. The city was in the process of modernization, which implied diverse social and cultural changes: the rise of the mercantilist society which, in the thought of Arlt, would only produce inequality. Arlt observes and describes the socialization habits of the working class in the chronicles of the first part of our collection: “las fámulas y los criados” (p.29) (house servants). In his chronicle *Aburrimiento del domingo* (The Tedium of Sunday), the writer points that the only people who “gozan bárbaramente del domingo” (p.29) (completely enjoy the Sunday) are those individuals who are not allowed to abandon their tasks for a long time, only a few hours on Sunday afternoon. Arlt depicts the normalized behavior of men and women, that is to say, how they had to behave in the public space:

Las mujeres, aunque haga un calor que derrita los nones, llevan fatalmente una piel colgada del brazo; una de esas pieles manidas, canallas; una piel de gato disfrazado de zorro, pero de tal mala manera que no es gato, ni zorro, ni piel. Los sombreros que estas mononas gastan parecen pertenecer a la ilustración de las revistas que salían en el año 1905.

Este enjambre, criadescos, lustradito, oloroso a agua de Colonia y hervoroso de amor, se encamina al bosque de Palermo a expansionarse con debida forma; los hombres, mientras caminan se dan robustas palmadas en las espaldas; y las mujeres marchan cojidas del brazo, en grupos de a tres. (Arlt, 2000, p.29)

Arlt portrays the socializing mechanisms to which the working class was subdued, and he did so using an ironic and cruel tone. Those rules, accepted by everyone, clearly defined not only the roles of men and women, but also how they had to behave and what public space they were allowed

to occupy according to their social class. Arlt also shows the contrasts between poverty and modernization when he describes the different streets of Buenos Aires. That is the case of *La calle Florida*, *Corrientes por la noche*, *En las calles de noche* y *Calles terribles* in which Arlt exposes a social and temporal journey around the streets of the city:

Multitud de gente bien vestida. Los desdichados evitan esta calle; los miserables que albergan un proyecto la eluden; los soñadores que llevan un mundo adentro la esquivan; todos aquellos que necesitan de la calle para desparramar su angustia o para recogerla en un ovillo nervioso, no entran en ésta, que es el escaparate vivo del lujo, de las mujeres que cuestan mucho dinero y de la vida que pasa vertiginosamente. (Arlt, 2000, p.31)

In this passage of *La calle Florida*, Arlt makes clear the role and the place of each social actor in the city. He also shows the role of upper-class women in a subtle way: they are an object which men can buy and, differently from the house servants who were mentioned before, the women of Florida street “cuestan mucho dinero.” (the women cost a lot of money or you need a lot of money to afford them). It is important to point out that in each text of this first group, Arlt barely describes female characters. Those characters are always mentioned as supporting actors in situations where the protagonist is a male character. This situation shows the insignificant role of women in public life. Women’s place was at home, with the family and therefore with marriage. Thus, in the second group of *aguafuertes* dedicated exclusively to stories about marriage, Arlt describes in detail the female universe that Simone De Beauvoir speaks of, but always from a perspective marked by the cultural framework that shapes his perception.

### **Marriage as a domination device**

As it was pointed out in the first section of this work, women in Buenos Aires had no participation in public life in the decades from 1920 to 1940. Hence, women’s own places were their homes: their parent’s home before marriage, and their husband’s home after marriage. Accordingly, in the second group of texts the reader will find chronicles that

exclusively refer to situations that revolve around marriage. Furthermore, the reader will find situations about men and women's relationships, in which the woman is an object to be acquired or conquered by men on the one hand; and an exploiter on the other hand. Both situations depict the subjection of women in a completely patriarchal society that restricts their personal development outside marriage.

The first chronicle of this second group shows from the very title *Primeras palabras para conquistar a la dama* (First words to conquer a lady) the role of object that women had. In this text, Arlt answers an enquiry of a male reader who does not have courage to "conquer" a lady: "Hay hombres a quienes agrada una ninfa y no tienen el coraje de hablarla (...) ¿es que alguna vez ha salido algún maestro para enseñarle a uno los primeros pasos?" (Arlt, 2000, p. 159). These words clearly show that it is the man the one who approaches first in "the conquest." On the contrary, women had to adopt a passive role. This passive role is shown by Arlt later in the same chronicle as well as in others:

A las mujeres lo único que les interesa son los buenos mozos. Bien plantados y mejor vestidos. Y después, que usted sea inteligente o burro, eso no tiene valor. La mujer no tiene la capacidad para juzgar de la inteligencia del hombre. Para juzgar de si es elegante o no, si, pero si es profundo o trivial, no. Y además se les importa tres pepinos de que sea inteligente. (Arlt, 2000, p. 161)

Using this ironic and contemptuous tone, Arlt depicts the social practices of his time that produce and reproduce the symbolic capital in which the main device is marriage, and marriage being the basis of the social order. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu (2015) also claims that women can only be seen as objects or symbols within marriage. This sense is built by men without women's consent and the purpose of this is to perpetuate or increase the symbolic capital possessed by men. That is why the tendencies (*habitus*<sup>3</sup>) are inseparable from the structures that generate them, both in the case of men and women. The inferiority and exclusion principle of women is a fundamental asymmetry, "The asymmetry of the object and the subject, the agent and the instrument, which is established between man and

woman in the field of symbolic exchange." (p. 59). This "feminine object" is built by many stereotypes according to how a woman should be and behave.

Regarding the different devices which perpetuate these differences, Arlt and Simone De Beauvoir agree on establishing that women are educated by women in a feminine environment with rules designed by men. Therefore, their natural destiny is marriage: "las mujeres son criadas con el exclusivo pensamiento de que al llegar a determinada edad "hay que casarse". Casarse es resolver el problema de la "piñata" (Arlt, 2000, p. 172). In this sense, Felipe Pigna (2013) points out that, despite the social changes that were taking place in Buenos Aires regarding the inclusion of women in the labor market, the notion that the primary function of women was to be a mother and take care of the home continued to prevail. Positivism sought to give a scientific basis to this idea based on the "biological functions" of the sexes. Thus, the secular and religious philosophers of the time, politicians of all currents and even union activists, including women, considered women's work as a "misfortune" or a "social evil". In this way, these social actors used the biological aspect (as Bourdieu correctly points out) to create the collective unconscious, which will later become the norm, that the fate of women is marriage because nature determines it. The manifestation of a double standard generated at the time is notorious: there was a generalized defense of the bourgeois family model, where the man was the "macho" income provider and the woman his "slave queen" in the house while at the same time thousands of women joined the labor system inside and outside their homes. Therefore, the counterpart of the "good public behavior" of family women was expressed in the daily contempt towards female workers. This is why women preferred to have a good marriage rather than developing personally and professionally.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that marriage subordinated women even more to male domination, not only in relation to how they should behave in social situations, but also in relation to economic aspects, as stated in articles 57 to 59 of Law 2393, passed in the year 1888:

Art.57. Si no hubiere contrato nupcial, el marido es el administrador legítimo de todos los bienes del matrimonio, incluso los de la mujer; tanto los que llevó al matrimonio, como los que adiriese después por títulos propios.

Art. 58. La mujer está obligada a habitar con su marido donde quiera que este fije su residencia. Si faltase a esa obligación, el marido puede pedir las medidas judiciales necesarias y tendrá derecho a negarle alimentos. Los tribunales, con conocimiento de causa, pueden eximir a la mujer de esta obligación, cuando de su ejecución resulte peligro para su vida.

Art. 59. La mujer no puede estar en juicio, por sí ni por procurador, sin licencia especial del marido, dada por escrito, con excepción de los casos en que este Código presume la autorización del marido o no la exige, o sólo exige una autorización general o sólo una autorización judicial. (Pigna, 2013, p. 441)

Therefore, marriage constituted a device of domination established by the State, whose representatives were men, with the aim of perpetuating and increasing the masculine capital of domination. Only in 1926, with the reform of the Civil Code, the notorious difference of “legal status” between the husband and wife was reduced; however, by that time, social practices were so ingrained that the husband’s domination over his wife continued in the marriage institution. In this sense, Bourdieu (2008) points out that prolonged submission to the norm and to the rules of the economy of symbolic goods is the principle of the system of strategies of reproduction with which men, possessors of the monopoly of the instruments of production and reproduction of symbolic capital, tend to ensure the conservation or the increase of said capital. These strategies (marital, educational, economic and of inheritance) always aim to the transmission of the inherited powers and privileges and they are the product of a continuous work, therefore historical, of reproduction to which singular agents contribute: men with physical and symbolic violence, and institutions such as family, school and the State with training. Arlt depicts this situation in his chronicle *Lo esencial es casarse* (The essential thing is to marry), where he denounces the

situation of women simulating a journalistic report in which the author puts, in the voice of an interviewed woman, a series of explanations of why women have marriage as their sole objective in life:

REPORTEADA.- (...) [A] los diez minutos de estar conversando con un hombre, una se da cuenta que es igual a todos (...) Una mujer se cansa al final. Éste, igual al otro; al final, aburrida se casa con el primero que se deja atrapar. A veces con un poco de buena voluntad, una mujer puede enamorarse... (...)

EL QUE SUSCRIBE.-Pero esas mujeres...

REPORTEADA.-No tienen la culpa. Están criadas así. Han visto la vida así. Desde chicas oyen hablar del matrimonio. Es decir que para ellas...

EL QUE SUSCRIBE.- ¿Por qué dice para ellas?

REPORTEADA.- Yo tengo mi personalidad. Por eso digo “para ellas”. Entre ellas y yo hay una diferencia... bueno... como le decía, para estas mujeres criadas con semejante criterio, no puede haber nada más que un final: casarse. Casarse es resolver el problema económico y otro montón de problemas. (Arlt, 2000, p.165-166)

The use of this interview structure, allows Arlt to break away from the voice of the narrator and display a female reality that throws away the stereotype that defines women as gender in the other chronicles of the collection. That stereotype is left aside only for a moment when it differentiates the group of women, “them”, and the interviewed one. The interviewed does not belong to the female universe that lives the city of Buenos Aires. In this way, the feminine discourse enters the text from a skeptical point of view that reveals not only the devices of domination but also the prejudices and stereotypes that define women.

As regards stereotypes, Alejandro Grimson and Eleonor Faur (2016) refer to myths in relation to how women should be: emotional, motherly and selfless. These myths show a wide range of stereotypes and commands: some outline the norms as to what is desirable and accepted for women, others degrade the feminine image. But these stereotypes were defined by men long before women were able to legitimize



their own voice. Even today, these stereotypes govern the behavior of many men and women. Men reconstruct the mythology and many women participate in its transmission. That is to say, women are the ones in charge of perpetuating their “traditional destiny” and transmitting the learning of their condition, how they experience it and in what universe they are locked up as Simone De Beauvoir states.

### In conclusion

We have tried to analyze throughout this work how women in Buenos Aires from the 1920s to the 1940s were represented in Roberto Arlt's chronicles. For this purpose, we have chosen the compilation of chronicles by Silvia Saítta entitled *Aguafuertes porteñas. Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana*. We discovered that the compiler grouped the texts into two large groups, the first dedicated to portraying the idiosyncrasies of the streets of Buenos Aires at the time, and the second dedicated to describe the relationships between men and women. The first group of chronicles offers the reader a cultural framework of the time, in which women have little or no participation in public life despite the modernization processes that were taking place, that also affected the social life of Buenos Aires. We discovered that the place of women was their home, so their natural destiny was marriage. Thus, in the second group of chronicles we find texts that describe situations around marriage, and we discovered that this was the main domination device of the time, since women did not have their own entity in the conjugal society but were under their husband's guard. We also discovered that women were (and still are) educated under norms established by men on the basis of a biological order, which is a cultural construction that perpetuates the relationship of domination. Nonetheless, women themselves were responsible for the transmission of these norms that are still part of the cultural unconscious and usual practices. In this regard, it is crucial not only to understand how women were and are educated, as we have proposed in our introduction based on the analysis of Simone De Beauvoir, but also what daily practices and micro-practices we must change, both men and women, in order to remove inequality and re-signify the concept of gender.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Butler considers the norms that regulate gender and sexuality, which are closely linked, to be the restrictions of a recognizable category of person. Her criticism to the gender norms set out that “to construct” the own gender implies “deconstruct” the dominant knowledge of the category “persona.”

<sup>2</sup> Each group starts with a quote which anticipates the reader the themes he or she will find out in the texts. Also, each group is separated from the previous one by an empty sheet. These characteristics contribute to the reading experience and provide a theme division between both groups. To have more information as regards the paratext and peritext concepts, go to Genette, Gérard. *Umbrals*. Siglo Veintiuno Editores. México, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu points out the habitus is the product of the social conditioning associated to certain condition. It is the generating and unifying principal which recreate the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a possession in a single lifestyle, that is to say, a single group of people, assets and practices. [Bourdieu, Pierre. *Capital cultural, escuela y espacio social*. Siglo veintiuno editores. Buenos Aires, 2008.]

<sup>4</sup> This double standard only expressed the clear differentiation of living conditions among the social classes of Argentina during the process of modernization that Arlt well describes in each of his chronicles. It should be noted that the dominant class is the one that establishes the rules through its speech, therefore socially accepted woman, possessing the necessary virtues to be considered as such, would be the “mother of the family” and not the worker.