

Early Feminist Voices from Argentina: Alfonsina Storni and Alejandra Pizarnik

Primeras Voces Feministas desde Argentina: Alfonsina Storni y Alejandra Pizarnik

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Abstract

In line with the prevailing essentialist gender ideology and sexist views of women of the times, the discourse of early 20th century literary tradition systematically marginalized, devalued and deauthorized female authors. Thus, women writers' relationships to texts and to writing was radically different from men's, giving rise to voices of resistance, as well as to a struggle for rights and identities beyond the stereotypical confines of femininity afforded by a patriarchal society. The goal of this article is to analyze and compare, from the perspective of feminist criticism, some of the poems by Alfonsina Storni and by Alejandra Pizarnik, in which the authors challenge literary (and societal) tradition of their times. To conclude, we will see that while these poets were born almost half a century apart, and each of them were informed by different waves of the feminist movement (the first and second wave, respectively), they both shared the fact that their poetry subverts the popular tropes of romantic love, and of purity, submission and domesticity typically ascribed to women –and women's writing- in those times.

Key words: feminist literary criticism, first wave feminism, second wave feminism, patriarchy, gender stereotypes

Resumen

En consonancia con la visión esencialista y sexista de las mujeres, propia de la ideología de género de las primeras décadas del siglo XX, el discurso de la tradición literaria de aquella época marginalizaba, desvalorizaba y desautorizaba sistemáticamente a las autoras. En consecuencia, la relación de las escritoras con los textos y con la escritura en sí era sustancialmente diferente de la de los varones, y daba lugar a voces de resistencia así como a luchas por derechos e identidades más allá de las restricciones estereotipadas a la femineidad impuestas por una sociedad patriarcal. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar y comparar, desde la perspectiva de la crítica literaria feminista, un grupo de poemas de Alfonsina Storni y de Alejandra Pizarnik, en los cuales las autoras desafían la tradición literaria (y social) de sus respectivas épocas. A modo de conclusión, observaremos cómo estas poetisas, no obstante haber nacido con casi medio siglo de diferencia, evidencian la influencia de las olas del feminismo de las que fueron contemporáneas (la primera y la segunda, respectivamente), y comparten el hecho de que su poesía subvierte los temas típicos del amor romántico, de la pureza, la sumisión y domesticidad con los que comúnmente se asociaban a las mujeres y a su producción literaria.

Palabras clave: crítica literaria feminista, primera ola del feminismo, segunda ola del feminismo, patriarcado, estereotipos de género

Introduction

The life of Alfonsina Storni (born May 29, 1892, Switzerland – died October 25, 1938, Argentina) exemplifies the rise of a new class of activist professional women in Argentina, many of whom were immigrants or first-generation citizens, who were greatly influenced by labor movements in urban areas and the growing First Wave Feminism demands for rights for women –including the right to vote, to an education, to work safely, and to own property. For those women, access to the public sphere was typically through the service industries, often as teachers and sometimes as journalists.

Storni's intellectual production takes place over the first four decades of the 20th century, a key period in terms of the rise of a modern intellectual environment, that is, a relatively autonomous social arena where functions in the sphere of symbolic production feature real –though relative– autonomy, vis-avis those from the social and political spheres. This process would give way to cultural modernity that would gradually gain strength over the following decades, resulting into a deeper transformation. This transformation would entail the social and economic modernization carried out by the Argentine state during the second half of the 19th century.

Alejandra Pizarnik (born April 16 or 29, 1936, Buenos Aires, Argentina - died Sept. 25, 1972, Buenos Aires), was born into a family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. She studied philosophy and literature at the University of Buenos Aires, and later ventured into painting, studying with the Catalan Argentine painter Juan Batlle Planas. In 1960, Alejandra moves to Paris, working for French publishing houses and magazines and translated into Spanish works writers, such as Antoinette Artaud and Marguerite Duras.

She returned to Buenos Aires in 1965 and published three of her eight collections of poetry, *Los trabajos y las noches* (1965; "The Works and the Nights"), *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968; *Extraction of the Stone of Madness [or Folly]*), and *El infierno musical* (1971; *The Musical Hell*). She also published her famous prose work, *La condesa sangrienta* (1965; *The Bloody Countess*), about Elizabeth Báthory, a Hungarian countess. Pizarnik's writing abounds with anguish, despair, and myriad references to suicide. As a result of this, she has often been grouped by critics with the *poètes maudits* (accursed poets), a term often used to refer to Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine.

Pizarnik took her own life in 1972. A posthumous title: *Alejandra Pizarnik: Selected Poems*, with translations by Cecilia Rossi, was published in 2010.

Powerful female voices from the South

Even though Storni's case may not be considered typical in view of her outstanding talent and drive, and the early recognition she achieved, she does embody, in many ways, both the struggles and the first victories of a new class of women. Storni's family emigrated from Switzerland to Argentina in 1896, when Alfonsina was only four, and they settled in the interior of the country. Like many women of the times, she was trained as a teacher and taught in rural areas. In 1912, she had a child out of wedlock and was soon driven to seek anonymity in Buenos Aires, where she continued to work as a teacher as well as with a theater group.

Over her lifetime, Storni was one of the most renowned female poets in Latin America. Still, her works were highly controversial because of their overt expression of female passion and feminist themes, and their open criticism of a sexist, patriarchal society. Additionally, her later work was harshly criticized due to their obscurity and experimental forms.

Her first book, *La inquietud del rosal* (1916, *The Disquietude of the Rosebush*), soon earned her recognition from Buenos Aires literary circles, and only two years later *El dulce daño* (1918, *The Sweet Injury*) would give her popular success. In her writings, we can see Storni's keen awareness of the anti-traditionalism of her class and gender position, which constitutes an indelible mark in all her production. As a poet, Storni boldly modifies the genre, which up until then had strictly adhered to rigid literary codes, particularly regarding the depiction of romantic love and the female figure.

As Beatriz Sarlo (1987) points out, Alfonsina Storni doesn't just refrain from hiding the various transgressive decisions she makes since her youth, but she flaunts them as a valuable defining feature, shaping her subjectivity as different from most of other women's. This distinctiveness would lead her to become a role model for many women, questioning the double standards of the established morals and challenging traditional sex/gender roles.

Consistent with her views and need for empowerment,

her poetry openly denounces women's confinement to domesticity as well as to the discourse of love and romanticism. She ironizes on this through the metaphor of the cage, for example, in the poem "Hombre pequeño"

Hombre pequeño, hombre pequeño,
Suelta a tu canario que quiere volar...
Yo soy el canario, hombre pequeño,
déjame saltar.
Estuve en tu jaula, hombre pequeño,
hombre pequeño que jaula me das.
Digo pequeño porque no me entiendes,

ni me entenderás.
Tampoco te entiendo, pero mientras tanto

ábreme la jaula que quiero escapar;
hombre pequeño, te amé media hora,
no me pidas más.

A similar challenging of sex/gender norms is also present in a number of other poems through a series of reversals of the traditional, stereotypical performances of women (passive) and men (active). These reversals often feature a high degree of irony and pose a conflict, or clash, between that which is voiced—particularly, by a woman—and that which is culturally expected and acceptable.

Among her most distinctive types of poems is the pattern featuring a female persona who defiantly addresses a male, usually through a number of rhetorical questions, challenging his authority and stereotypical views of women as well as the traditional roles imposed to them by society. In her most popular and celebrated poem of this type, "You want me white" (1918, *The Sweet Injury*), a woman wittingly retorts male demands for purity and chastity in females by calling on men to perfect themselves if they expect perfection: "Talk to the birds/and rise at dawn./And when your flesh/has been turned/and when you have put your soul in it,/which in bedchambers/ has been entangled/only then, my good man/

(Little, little man), where the speaker finds herself trapped by a mediocre, insecure man, who contrasts sharply with the traditional male figure typically imbued with the power to give meaning to women's lives and fulfil their yearnings.

Little, little man, little, little man,
Set your canary free. It wants to fly...
I am the canary, little, little man,
let me hop about.
I've been in your cage, little, little man,
little, little man, who puts me in a cage,
I call you little because you don't

understand me,
nor will you understand.

I don't understand you either, but in the
meantime,
open my cage for I want to fly away;
little, little man, I loved you half an hour,
no me pidas más.
Don't ask me for more.¹

can you expect me white/can you expect me of snow/can you expect me chaste."

Perhaps the most powerful poem from her early work is "The she-wolf" (1916, *The Disquietude of the Rosebush*), where Storni breaks with traditional imagery associated with women in literature and with societal gender norms and expectations for "good" women. She even ends the poem in a defiant note, pointing to how threatening liberated women ("she-wolves") seem to a conservative, submissive society ("little sheep").

¹The translation of this poem—as well as of the rest of the ones analyzed in this paper—is my own.

“La loba”

Yo soy como la loba.
Quebré con el rebaño
Y me fui a la montaña
Fatigada del llano.

Yo tengo un hijo fruto del amor, de amor sin ley

Que no pude ser como las otras, casta de buey
Con yugo al cuello; ilibre se eleve mi cabeza!

Yo quiero con mis manos apartar la maleza.
Mirad cómo se ríen y cómo me señalan

Porque lo digo así: (Las ovejitas balan
Porque ven que una loba ha entrado en el corral

Y saben que las lobas vienen del matorral).

“The she-wolf”

I am like the she-wolf
I´ve broken with the herd
And fled to the mountains.
Tired of the plain

I have a son, offspring of love, of lawless love

For I couldn't be like the others, like an ox
With a yoke around its neck; let my head rise high!

I want to clear the weed with my own hands
See how they laugh and how they point fingers

For this is what I say: (The little sheep bleat
Because they see a she-wolf has entered the barn

And they know she-wolves come from the bushes)

In this poem, the speaker clearly distances herself from the broad female sex/gender group, featuring a personal evolution that differentiates herself from those women whose perception of the world is both dictated and constrained by the patriarchal ideology (“I’ve broken with the herd.” – “lawless love” – “with a yoke around its neck”). She openly criticizes the way society punishes women who do not conform (“See how they laugh and how they point fingers”), perceiving them as a dangerous “others” (“they see a she-wolf has entered the barn”).

As regards Alejandra Pizarnik, her recurrent themes include silence, death and sex, and her writing features a profound impact of her childhood years, along with a poignant fear of failure and inadequacy. According to Virginia Woolf, a feminist is any woman who speaks the truth about her life, and that is just what Alejandra did through her works. She spoke the truth. She did not say –or do– what was expected of her. She did not claim to be happy, or even merely content with life. She did not seek to please, but to voice her darkness and her insecurities; and that is why her words move us.

What is unmentionable, unnamable, in Pizarnik’s writing is her life itself. Death, on the other hand, is obtrusive, and therefore the opposite of Eros. Thus, eroticism is always

implied in her words. As she herself puts it: “*Si yo temo a la muerte es por su color. Si me dijeran qué necesito y qué espero responderé: juguetes y pasto verde claro, cajas de música y amantes de ojos azules, velas en forma y color de flores y aves de corral y de pájaros hindúes, que al alumbrarse dan llamas celestes y rojas y azules y verdes, pero de un tono infantil y sexual a la vez.*” (Pizarnik, 2013). (If I fear death, it is because of its color. If they asked me what I need and what I expect, I would answer: toys, light green grass, musical boxes, and blue-eyed lovers, candles in the shape and color of flowers and poultry and Hindu birds, which give out light blue, red and blue and green light when they are lit, but of a childish and sexual shade at the same time.)

In Pizarnik’s works, readers are faced with the bluntness and nakedness of a life that has been torn apart by pain, while being exorcised by it through the power of words. Her work is autobiographical. It is her way of searching and probing death, which is both feared and longed for, at the same time, since she was an adolescent, always struggling with a body she felt far from comfortable in. (She actually saw herself as ugly and fat.) Unlike the images stereotypically evoked by femaleness and femininity, which

are often featured in canonical female poetry, such as life, rebirth, hope and continuity, her writing exudes death and can actually be seen to stem from her death drive. And it is words themselves, rather than her poems, that become Pizarnik's tools and instruments.

“La jaula”
Afuera hay sol.
No es más que un sol
pero los hombres lo miran
y después cantan.

Yo no sé del sol.
Yo sé la melodía del ángel
y el sermón caliente
del último viento.

Sé gritar hasta el alba
cuando la muerte se posa desnuda
en mi sombra.

Yo lloro debajo de mi nombre.
Yo agito pañuelos en la noche
y barcos sedientos de realidad
bailan conmigo.
Yo oculto clavos
para escarnecer a mis sueños enfermos.

Afuera hay sol.
Yo me visto de cenizas.

“The cage”
Outside there's sun.
It is merely a sun
but men look at it
and then they sing.

I don't know of the sun.
I know of the angel's melancholy
and the heated sermon
of the last wind.

I know of screaming until dawn
when death perches naked
on my shadow.

I weep underneath my name.
I shake handkerchieves at night
and ships thirsty of reality
dance with me.
I conceal nails
to scorn my sickly dreams.

Outside there's sun.
I'm wearing ashes.

Contrary to her predecessor Alfonsina Storni, Pizarnik was not exactly a feminist poet in the political sense, even though the years of her youth were deeply informed by the second wave of feminism, whose slogan was “the personal is political”. In fact, she was often regarded as apolitical and so unworldly that her single, overt goal, as César Aira (1998) points out, was to produce good poems and get to become a good poet. When asked, during an interview, whether she had had obstacles to overcome in her career because of being a woman she would reply that even though her gender

had not prevented her from writing, she thought that having been born a woman was unfortunate, as well as being a Jew, being poor, black, or a homosexual. Nevertheless, she added, the important thing was what you did with your misfortunes. Even when she detached herself from overtly rebellious political stances, the powerful, subversive force of her poetry is nevertheless quite apparent.

According to Pizarnik, poetry is the place where everything takes place. Just like love, humor, and suicide, as well as every profoundly subversive act, poetry gets rid of what is

not its freedom or its truth. Using the words *freedom* and *truth* when referring to the world where we live or where we do not live, is telling a lie. However, it is not so when they

“Los trabajos y las noches”
para reconocer en la sed mi emblema
para significar el único sueño
para no sustentarme nunca de nuevo en el amor

he sido toda ofrenda
un puro error
de loba en el bosque
en la noche de los cuerpos
para decir la palabra inocente

As we can see, here Pizarnik, like Storni had done decades before her, uses the image of the she-wolf to underscore the otherness of the speaker of her poem (“a she-wolf from the woods”), seeking to distance herself from humanity while denouncing her fear of intimacy (“not to sustain myself on love ever again”) and vulnerability (“I have been all offering”).

Conclusions

Analyzing just this handful of poems by Storni and Pizarnik allows us to see that they share a number of feminist elements in their productions. Being female writers in times when patriarchy sternly resisted the advances of the feminist struggle deeply affected both their lives as authors. Thus, the stereotypical obligations and expectations associated to womanhood and femininity feature heavily in their productions. (They both use the trope of the cage, for example, to express the way they feel constrained by society’s norms.)

Another point of coincidence in their work is the way in which they experience and portray romantic love. They both defy societal and sex/gender conventions of their times and distance themselves from most “good” women (both of them resort to the she-wolf trope, for example), challenging traditional, idealised notions of love as being rewarding and fulfilling.

In both authors, poetry becomes a weapon to exorcise

are used to refer to poetry, the place where everything is possible.

“Works and nights”
to recognize my emblem in thirst
to signify the only dream
not to sustain myself on love ever again

I have been all offering
a sheer wandering
a she-wolf from the woods
in the night of bodies
to utter the word innocent.

their otherness and their fears, a way of finding their own voice, of asserting their identity and warding off adversity. Additionally, despite the struggles and personal demons they had to face (which eventually led them both to commit suicide), they were able to transcend and leave a superb poetic legacy that still lives on and moves us deeply.

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