



The Mother without a Child: Exploration of Motherhood, Nation and the Woman in Gabriela Mistral's Poetry

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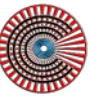
Abstract

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Considering the time when Gabriela Mistral operated in the Latin American literary scene, it was no mean feat for a woman to make firm and bold statements as she did, taking up the issues of Latin American women and their quest for identity in a nation that was yet to have a settled socio-economic structure. Through her writings, she laid bare the prevailing conditions to which the women were exposed in the country she called home. Her poems can be seen as desperate attempts to relocate the identity of the Latin American women in the context of national interest. Though not a mother herself, motherhood, she felt, is intrinsically connected to the nature of a woman, and is immensely significant as a contributing factor in the formation of a nation. This paper would, therefore, attempt to trace the strains of motherhood in the exploration of women in the context of nation in the writings of Gabriela Mistral.

Keywords: Nation, Motherhood, Women, Identity.

For Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), the first Latin American author who received a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1952, picking up a pen instinctively and letting her thoughts flow, carving ink on white sheets of paper was never an unfamiliar scene. She poured out her heart with unusual sincerity that made her poems feel like songs, echoing in the heart of the readers. When Mistral writes, "A song is the wound of love that things opened in us" (*Selected Prose* 75), one could easily understand the principles that prioritized certain emotions and feelings in Mistral's vocation and gave birth to an amazing body of work, left for the world to internalize. True to her soul's calling, Mistral's poems are indeed songs that profusely breathe the wounds of love which she believed was the outcome of every human activity in one's span of life, for life is supposed to be a



journey in love. Quite literally, it was this wound of love dealt by the suicide of Romelio Ureta that inspired her first collection of poems *Desolacion* (Mistral, *Madwomen* 6). This collection, close to her heart, finally met the world in 1922 under the supervision of Fredrico de Onis, Professor of Spanish at Columbia University (Mistral, *Selected Poems* 10), and charmed the readers with its trance like poems that came from heart, to be scribed in heart as well. Love and longing never left the composition of Mistral's sensibility, though she never shied away from defining love in her own terms.

Anonymity was something that Mistral sought throughout her life, even when fame had touched her feet, perhaps in a bid to avoid courting further troubles in a life already at the threshold of multiple difficulties. Having seen life the hard way since early childhood, it was not out of context that Lucila Godoy Alcayaga would ditch her real name and assume Gabriela Mistral for the sake of anonymity. The choice of this name was deliberate according to some, derived from Archangel Gabriel and sea wind as a form of her surname, as Langston Hughes would point out in the "Introduction" of *Selected Poems*, anthologizing Minstral's celebrated works (5). Randall Couch was among the Mistral scholars who could never ignore the association of Mistral's adopted pseudonym with Gabriele d'Annunzio and Frédéric Mistral, the two writers of late romantic tradition whose implicit influence could easily be discovered in the writing of Gabriela Mistral (*Madwomen* 6). It does leave the scholars of Mistral's works wonder about the possibilities of her being aware of the symbolic significance of the name's association with the myth of St. Gabriela. Quite interestingly, Mistral's life and the philosophy that drove her life was indeed a journey that went on to justify the dynamic of this nomenclature.

Gabriela Mistral strongly believed in the significance of an artist's participation in the society and a manifestation of this could well easily be found in her writings. Social interactions, social responsibilities and the influence that people and situations around the author, Mistral believed, were responsible, quite glaringly, in shaping the identity of the artist or the author. In her essay "Matrilineage, Matrilanguage: Gabriela Mistral's Intimate Audience of Women", Elizabeth Rosa Horan writes, "In poetry and prose, Gabriela Mistral repeatedly observes that the identity of the artist is inseparable from the artist's role in the community" (447). Horan's views quite adequately projects Mistral's earnest propagation through her works that the artist, in her case, the poet, must consummate her creative sensibilities within the bounds of the society to bring about the essential justice to the essence of expression built through the concerned creation. Thus, when despair,



gloom and the grey sides of life found prominent display in her writings, in their truest shades, it came out as no particular surprise. She, more than anyone else, had seen days as gloomy as a moonless night during her childhood, through her adolescence and into her adulthood.

Mistral's poetry and prose was an attempt on her part to concretize the manifestation of the way she negotiated her own identity not only as a Latin American woman in the space dominated by male supremacy, but also showing solidarity towards the consolidation of a national pride. The very act of writing became, for her, not only a medium of expression addressing the unexplored that tinged her soul and being, but was also a strong weapon that she would henceforth use dexterously to carve a space for herself and establish her own identity. With her own identity, Mistral sought to rediscover the identity of Chile as a growing democracy, a country where she was born, a country she would have to leave forever in her early thirties. Her poems, a bit more than her prose, came to be seen as songs from the poet's heart, exquisitely personal, yet carrying a voice that spoke for the causes of the collective.

Stability was always a commodity Gabriela Mistral could never afford while she was exposed to the realms of perpetual anxiety since her childhood. The absence of her father ensured that her mother had to toil hard to make both the ends meet, and it was only a matter of time that young Lucila had to join the course of life and look to contribute her share to the running of the family. Thus, hers was never a childhood of happy days amidst playmates, instead, was one that imposed the burdens of worry and maturity on the tender shoulders of a teenage girl. Through her mother's efforts, she was taken in as a teacher's assistant, which, incidentally, was the beginning of a long and fruitful career as an educationist. With no access to proper institutionalized education, Mistral was mostly self-educated, assisted by her step sister Emelina (Mistral, *Madwomen* 4). This inculcated in her a peculiar tendency of self-dependence and instilled in her a zeal that would guide her to a uniqueness of spirit in the years to come. As days went by, she began refining her skills while being very careful in not letting the real essence of her being desert her.

In Gabriela Mistral, we find a tormented woman, a woman who had lived a very difficult life with little allowances, a woman who was determined to let herself be known to the world, and she did a perfect job there. True to the definition of a self-made woman, Gabriela Mistral not only made a mark in the contemporary literary scene very soon, she cared enough to leave a lasting impact in building a collective consciousness among the women of a nation that was trying to develop its own socio-economic structure. Once her first collection of poetry was published, the world had

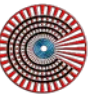


found a writer who spoke from the heart and the women around the world identified themselves with the poet. Influencing women young and old, her works transcended the bounds of the Latin American nations and soon had a pan American audience. Writing at a time when the modernists were taking the world to whirlwind, she was no novice to the celebrated works and techniques. However, her works displayed a fine balance between willing adoption of modernism and establishing one's own style, trying to make a point. This desire to establish a style of her own does speak about her nature in volumes. It was this style of her writing that seemed too personal and inviting while she dealt with themes as universal as possible. In her early twenties, Mistral had regular correspondence with the famous Nicaraguan writer Ruben Dario and Mexican poet Amado Nervo, who were prominent practitioners of modernist techniques in their writings (*Madwomen 7*). This was, perhaps, a clear anticipation of the transcendence of Gabriela Mistral from being a national figure to a woman of international significance. This would also, in 1945, fetch her, the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature.

The very act of writing was a recluse for her. In "How I Write" Mistral is happy to confess, "Writing always makes me happy; it soothes my spirit and bestows on me an innocent, gentle, child-like day. It is the feeling of having spent a few hours in my true homeland, in my habits, in my unfettered impulses, in full freedom (*Selected Prose 207*).

In Gabriela Mistral's writings, we find a harmonious integration of the public and the private. For Mistral, writing erased borders, borders that existed between the nations, between human beings and between the private and the public. In writing, in the very act of creation, she claims to discover a medium to redefine the meaning of her life. Mistral's life was a site which saw a curious mingling of self-less activism determined to bring social change and becoming a voice that would force the world to reckon its presence. Her oeuvre of work would gradually conjure up a force that would be seen fighting untiringly for the cause of the women since the last page of creative endeavour. Mistral's solitary life, her financial stability, the scheme of things that surrounded her professional life would all culminate into an influence that would accommodate conflicting notions, perhaps unconsciously, at times.

A career of a school teacher in provincial towns, blooming into a career of a director saw a sharp progress that, of course, had enough share of obstacles. Mistral was targeted time and again, where all the cases obliquely or directly pointed towards her lack of institutionalized education, which would ultimately force her to give up her job in Chile and leave the shores of her motherland,



never to settle there again. Coming to Mexico as an advisor in the developmental projects dealing with school education was only the beginning of a journey that would see her travelling through half the world and settling in France, Italy, Spain and America in intermittent periods during her lifetime. Her travels gave her experience enough to understand the world and life, the nature of life and the way life is lived in the countries of international prominence. This did her a great deal of good to realize the real state of life in her own country, Chile and the uncanny glimpses of the miserable state of development it had to offer. These find subtle manifestations in her writings and letters where she is found bold enough to accept the situation and vent her anguish. However, as Margaret J. Bates writes, “Not all the poems which have come from the mouth of this ‘mestiza de vasca’ are cries of anguish” (79), the readers are left to analyze the poems, taking one at a time, and churn out the bits of meaning and sense that Mistral intended to disseminate through her poems. Instead of lamenting her situation, she had picked up the baton of responsibility upon herself, to speak for the section of the society that she found to be the most neglected. Thereby, we see the entire body of her works turn into an endeavour to speak about this marginalized section of the country, which she identified as her own sex. However, it would not be wise to mark her, Horan feels, “as an isolated and nearly heroic figure rather than as a writer who deliberately established herself as a spokeswoman, writing to and about Latin American woman” (448). Therefore, it would not be entirely wrong to consider Gabriela Mistral as one of the earliest figures who became a prominent mouthpiece of the Latin American women.

A life of financial instability and unfulfilling days from a very tough childhood had made her look at life from all the possible sides. Hailing from a family that belonged to the weaker section of society, she was forced to support her family since she was fifteen. This had made her identify the real lacunas in the social structures and discover the fronts that required immediate attention. And her career as an educationist led her to believe that the crux of the entire problem lay in the way women were contextualized in the Latin American countries. A close reading and analysis of her works would clearly suggest that Gabriela Mistral sought to explore womanhood through her poems and prose. Keeping aside her poems and fables for the children, which according to Elizabeth Horan was “a bridge toward poetic recognition” (449), majority of her works addressed issues pertaining to the cause of women. This is also explained when Mistral herself confesses in her work “How I Write”: “I revise more than people would believe” (*Selected Prose* 207), supporting her tendency to omit poems from one particular collection and including it in other

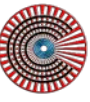


collections, in an attempt to segregate the poems written for children and poems written for and about women.

About Gabriela Mistral, Horan writes, "...her aim is to give voice and words and therefore power to women..." (449-450). A close reading of Mistral's poems would do good to justify this claim, while explaining the existence of a huge body of Mistral's poems and prose celebrating womanhood. Through this self-curated celebration of womanhood, Mistral dreamt of fetching power to her own sex. Thus, it never really come as a shock when Mistral agrees to Chilean President Gonzalez Videla calling her "phenomenon of a woman without a political party" doing justice to her accounts (*Selected Prose* 231).

Among the other concerns, motherhood comes out to be one of the powerful references that recur in Mistral's poems. To shed light on the thematic concerns of her works, as John Zubizarreta opines, "She fashions a poetic program that explores the theme of the archetypal power of the maternal woman and the connections among motherhood, children, God's grace, and nature's design" (296). In her prose-poem "La Madre" or "The Mother", she describes her complex relationship with her own mother with whom she shared a very close bonding since her childhood, but was unable to share enough moments of love. As she wrote, her emotions poured out while she remembered, in faint and vivid memories, the early days of life spent with her mother. In her poem is engraved a sense of lamentation for the lost years and opportunities. As the poem unfolded, the poet went on to speak of longing and the intimate space a mother shares with her child.

In "The Mother", perhaps the most powerful expression comes at the end suggesting helpless surrender when Mistral's writes, "I dropped onto her breast, and once again I was the little girl who sobbed in her arms, terrified of life!" (*Selected Prose* 46). This not only carries a sense of affectionate longing, but also hints at a desperate search for stability that she couldn't taste in her life. Mistral talks about a transformation in the concluding part of the poem, where her thoughts converged into a point of escape, initiating a sudden turning of time. She imagines herself becoming a child, "a little girl", the moment she receives shelter in her mother's breast. But this little girl is not the one Mistral had known in her childhood. This girl has experienced life, had seen the horror of being in crisis and is therefore "terrified of life". At the same time, the poem also sings of hope, and the mother is shown as a figure, the archetypal mother as the giver of warmth, security and peace to whom, the poet and her sisters of the sex can confide and hide their fears.



In another of her prose-poem “Tell Me, Mother...” she writes, “Mother, tell me everything you learned from your old pains. Tell me about childbirth, how his little body would come out, webbed in the threads of my womb” (47), Mistral shows how she is banking on her mother’s experience to draw lessons of life. This poem equivocally suggests the role the older generations of women were supposed to play in educating the newer generations about the ways of the world. This, Mistral argues, could be a way to strengthen the formation of the identity of Latin American women, something Gabriela Mistral always dreamt of. Mistral projects the possible existence of a private network of support, a chain flowing through generations and nurturing women to be fit and fine to face the world. The subsequent lines of this poem brew intimacy that at once brings Mistral close to the crew of female readers. This intimacy is necessarily a familiar one and has been a defining feature in Mistral’s poems. It is through this honest and unabashed portrayal of intimacy that proves to be instrumental in forging a connection between the readers and the poet.

Scholars like Elizabeth A. Marchant consider female body to be the primary source of connection to the nation. She argues, “Through biological reproduction and links to the natural world, women come to forge a bond between nation and nature” (50). She feels, women, through the agency of giving birth, is not only reciprocating to the needs of nature and bridging a tie, but is also contributing largely to the formation of the national identity and its subsequent developments. Bringing the citizens to the world is thought to be a fundamental and necessary aspect of building a nation, and the role of a woman as the provider of future citizens, Marchant feels, is indispensable. This is where the context of motherhood in the poems of Gabriela Mistral becomes all the more important. She continues, in Mistral’s discourse on women, “...motherhood represents a means by which nation formation can be newly interrogated and understood...” (50), which clearly promotes the prospect of creation of a dominant identity of the woman in the context of the nation and assuming importance on the part of the Latin American women. Mistral’s own indulgence in national development can be considered to be largely responsible for her acknowledgments of the women’s role in the context of the nation formation. This would also be, therefore, an attempt to subvert the prevailing patriarchal order, which she had displayed, quite convincingly, through her life and works.

Mistral’s poem “Sweetness” also projects the significance of motherhood and its effect on a woman: “Because of the sleeping child I carry, my footsteps/ have grown silent. And my whole heart is reverent since/ it bears the mystery” (*Selected Poems* 38). In “Eternal Grief” Mistral



writes, “If he suffers within me I grow pale; grief overtakes me/ at his hidden pressure, and I could die from a single/ motion of this one I cannot see” (*Selected Poems* 42). The importance of motherhood could be drawn further in the discourse of Gabriela Mistral when we find her writing “For his sake, for him now lulled to sleep like a/ thread of water in the grass, do not hurt me,” (*Selected Poems* 43), in her poem “For Him”. A wonderful association between human and nature through the birth of a child could only be drawn by Mistral, as she did in her poem “Helpers”:

While yet the child sleeps within me
 knowing nothing of this earth,
 to help me complete him
 the grass makes his hair,
 the date palm his tiny fingers
 and white wax his fingernails.
 Snails give him a way of hearing
 and the red strawberry his tongue,
 and the brook brings him laughter
 while the mountain gives him patience. (*Selected Poems* 70)

This poem brilliantly correlates the mother and nature, working closely in giving birth and bringing up a citizen of the nation on one hand, and a human life, a being close to heart on the other. As intimate and close the relationship might be, Mistral calls the mothers “helpers” who are responsible for shaping a nation’s bearers. The journey is a long one, beginning in the pre-oceanic state in the womb of the mother, and ending with the mother taking her last breath.

“The Woman Unburdened” is another poem that explores Mistral’s conception of womanhood pretty adequately: “I bore no age or name, / neither my triumph nor my defeat” (Mistral, *Madwomen*47). Defending her choice of projecting motherhood as a powerful tool in constructing identity and reshaping history, as a note to *Desolacion*, Mistral writes:

No! Here they stay, dedicated to those women who can see that the sanctity of life begins with motherhood, which is, accordingly, sacred. I want them to feel the tenderness with which a woman who cares for the children of others looks upon the mothers of all the children of the world! (*Selected Prose*52)



Gabriela Mistral, here, is assuming the image of a prophetic figure, preaching universal motherhood to her readers, while also inviting them to collaborate with her, and acknowledge the contribution of nature in making a statement for their own sex. There are poems that specify her understanding of the relationship between men and women, “The Poems of the Saddest Mother” featuring among them, talks of the fear of being thrown out (49). Mistral’s poem “He Kissed Me” walks on the same rails:

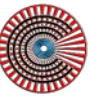
He kissed me and now I am someone else; someone
else in the pulse that repeats the pulse of my
own veins and in the breath that mingles with my
breath. Now my belly is as noble as my heart.

And even on my breath is found the breath of
flowers; all because of the one who rests gently
in my being, like dew on the grass! (Mistral, *Selected Poems* 35)

This poem also explores the disputed and ever changing terrain of the bond shared by men and women. Similarly, her poem “The Anxious Woman” is less about a woman and her anxiety and more about the exploration of the understanding of a man and expectations from him from the point of view of a woman who is anxious. Poems like “Prisoner’s Woman” and “A Pious Woman” also deal with her understanding of the social structure and social beings in the way they are intrinsically connected to the labyrinthine structure of the community and the world. “The Sleepless Woman” could be considered another fine example of this:

In one breath of mine he climbs
and I suffer until he arrives—
a mad cascade that his fate
sometimes descends and others scales
and a crazy feverish thorn
castanetting against my door... (Mistral, *Madwomen* 51)

However, evidences of her conflicting self, her anxiety and inherent duality can be understood from the reading of her poem “Other” where Mistral writes, “I killed a woman in me:/ one I did not love” (*Madwomen* 31). The lines that follow gives us a clear conception of her understanding of a woman’s psyche and could be considered a manifestation of her own desires:



She was the blazing flower
 of the mountain cactus;
 she was drought and fire,
 never cooling her body. (Mistral, *Madwomen*31)

She ends the poem in a very authoritative and didactic tone as she suggests, “I killed her. You women/ must kill her too!”(33) Another of her poem is titled “The Abandoned Woman” which also deals critically with the psyche of a woman who tries to understand her relationship with her nation and thereby rediscover her own identity. In “A Woman”, Mistral writes:

Where her house used to be she stays
 as if it had never burned.
 She speaks only her soul’s words,
 and to those who pass, none. (*Madwomen* 83)

Mistral’s works would always stand as the clarion call for the formation of a sisterhood that would support each other and contribute to the development of the nation. In her poem “The Happy Woman” she writes:

We have each other by the grace
 of having abandoned everything;
 now we live free from
 the time of jealous eyes;
 and in the light we seem
 cotton of the same spinning. (Mistral, *Madwomen* 55)

Mistral’s poems, more often than not, equivocates a call for building a sisterhood that would support each other, identify with each other and develop a sense of universal solidarity, care little about “everything” they abandoned. Mistral’s prose-poem “Sister” also talks of mutual cooperation and willingness to forge bonds that would give birth to a world of love and dependence:

Today I saw a woman plowing furrow. Her hips are broad, a
 like mine, for love, and she goes about her work bent over
 the earth.

I caressed her waist; I brought her home with me. She will
 drink rich milk from my own glass and bask in the shade of



my arbors growing pregnant with the pregnancy of love.
 And if my own breasts be not generous, my son will put his
 lips to hers, that are rich. (*Selected Poems* 39)

When in her prose-poem “A Song”, Mistral writes “A woman is singing in the valley. The falling shadow erases her, but her song lifts her over the countryside” (*Selected Prose* 76), it would not be entirely wrong to assume that in the persona in the poem, the singing woman, Mistral rediscovers herself towards the fag end of her life. She muses that even when her mortal form would cease to exist, her songs, i.e. her poems would lift her over and makes her immortal to her intimate audience of women.

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