WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND SACRIFICE IN *PEDRO PÁRAMO* AND *LA MUERTE DE ARTEMIO CR UZ*

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Both Pedro Páramo, published in 1955 by Juan Ruflo, and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* published in 1962 by Carlos Fuentes, depict female characters who, at first glance, would seem to be responsible for all that is wrong in the lives of the male protagonists.[1] Catalina, like her daughter Teresa, has denied Artemio the love and affection which presumably would make his death bearable and would have made his life a success. The protagonist's life further appears to have been damaged by the fact that as an infant he was abandoned by his mother, and as an adolescent he was the victim of the ridiculous pride of a foolish old woman. Similarly, Juan Preciado was ostensibly sent to his demise in Comala by his mother's deathbed insistence that he return to her homeland of dreams and fantasies. It might appear, then, that both male protagonists have been victimized, at least psychologically, by the whims and capriciousness of the female characters who surround them. A re-examination of the novels, however, reveals that the female characters of both works, while ostensibly peripheral to the message of the text and the action of the story, are actually the victims of the males and precisely fit the role of sacrificial victim as studied by René Girard, in spite of the fact that they are not sacrificed in the common sense of the term of being brutally murdered.[2]

In his comprehensive study, *Violence and the Sacred,* René Girard has shown that sacrifice, particularly religious sacrifice, is merely a socially acceptable outlet or diversion for the basic violence inherent to mankind. Thus, the sacrificial victim is necessarily desired and despised as he/she represents both the violence inherent to the sacrificer and the potential for surmounting that violence. In *Pedro Páramo* and *Artemio Cruz,* we find no apparent sacrifice, religious or otherwise, and the violence which does exist within the novels might appear more overt than

covert and thus in need of no further study.[3] Nevertheless, let us carry Girard's theory of sacrifice and violence one step further and examine the portrayal of the female characters in the novels in connection with it.

Now, as Girard points out, sacrifice is always associated with ritual; the sacrifice is the product or final phase of the ritual, while the very purpose of the sacrificial rite, as we noted, is to channel mankind's violence, a violence which might otherwise run rampant and destroy the society and/or the culture. In other words, the sacrificial rite serves to unite the society and keep it united, while the true meaning of the rite and its true purpose are necessarily hidden from its participants who *believe* its function to be *other* than what it is and necessarily fail to comprehend it as an outlet for their own violence. In addition, the sacrificial ritual is always dependent upon a substitution; we sacrifice X, according to Girard, in order not to do violence to Y.

Because throughout his study Girard is discussing sacrifice as murder (or exile, which he considers a form of death) and violence in its most overt form (death, mutilation, etc.), what he overlooks and what becomes pertinent to the discussion which follows is that sacrifice, ritual sacrifice, is covert in more ways than one. We suggest that if the ultimate meaning of the sacrifice is metaphoric and hidden from the celebrants, then the sacrifice itself, i.e. the death, may also be figurative and hidden from its participants as it is in our two novels. Girard, to be sure, indirectly alludes to this possibility at several points. He does see exile as a form of death (if it is a form of death then surely it is a metaphoric form) and he suggests, too, that some rites conclude with only a symbolic death. We repeat, then, that sacrifice as defined by Girard is directly related to the portrayal of the female in these novels insofar as females are related to death, metaphoric or otherwise.

The world of the dead in *Pedro Páramo* is populated almost exclusively by women; similarly, Artemio Cruz' deathbed is physically encircled by skirts (women's and the priest's) while most of his deathbed recollections are marked by the presence of one or more females - Laura, Regina, Lilia, etc. But, what is there in our texts that might be construed as sacrifice? Or better yet, let us pursue the question from the other direction. What acts are performed to prevent greater violence and/or to create or maintain social order and unity? Considering the question in its relationship to the female characters which most specifically interest us here, we discover that the social order is maintained in both *Artemio Cruz* and *Pedro Páramo* via the *ritual* of marriage. Here, our reader will respond that marriage certainly cannot be viewed as sacrifice of the female. On the contrary, the popular view of marriage in

Western civilization portrays it as the ultimate goal of the female, the fulfillment of all her dreams. Paradoxically, such a popular concept is not contradictory to sacrifice as studied by Girard, for, as he demonstrates so convincingly, the sacrificial victim is often a *willing* victim, for reasons we shall discuss later. But, let us first examine the marriages in the texts.

Pedro Páramo marries twice. First, he weds Juan Preciado's mother, Dolores Preciado, significantly, because he wants her land and because he owes her family a great deal of money:

> - Mañana comenzaremos a arreglar nuestros asuntos. Empezaremos por las Preciados. ¿Dices que a ellas les debemos más?
>
> - Sí. Y a las que les hemos pagado menos . . . Y la Lola, quiero decir, doña Dolores, ha quedado como dueña de todo. Usted sabe: el rancho de Enmedio. Y es a ella a la que le tenemos que pagar.
>
> - Mañana vas a pedir la mano de la Lola. (p. 40)

Later, he marries Susana San Juan whom he has loved since adolescence. The violence which surrounds this marriage is far more overt than that of his first marriage, for in order to marry the latter, Pedro has her father killed, and one wonders if she is not being kept in that room in Pedro's house by force. Similarly, Artemio Cruz marries Catalina principally to gain access to her family's wealth, land, and position. Her father, knowing this full well, nonetheless hands her over to the stranger, Artemio, saying to her as she meekly protests: «Este hombre puede salvarnos. Cualquier otra consideración sale sobrando . . . Piensa en los últimos años de tu padre. ¿Crees que no merezco un poco de . . . ?» (p. 52). What both texts suggest (whether consciously or not on the part of the authors) is that the ritual of marriage will forestall a more overt, more dangerous form of violence.[4] Were the two protagonists not able to marry the landed daughters, they would have had to kill the father or brother and/or take the land by force, by physical violence. But, can violence ever truly be forestalled? Or do we simply (as Girard suggests) redirect it in a more suitable and socially acceptable form so that it becomes more covert and *appears* less violent?

As we mentioned, substitution is also considered a basic tenet of sacrifice, sacrifice designed to redirect violence, and, clearly, both *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Pedro Páramo* are overtly concerned with substitution. Because

Pedro loved Susana San Juan, who for a variety of reasons became inaccessible to him, a series of substitutions are effectuated at the time of his marriage to Dolores. First, Pedro in essence replaces his father upon the latter's death and immediately usurps the elder Paramo's power as he sets about rectifying the errors in his father's business (substitution 1). Susana has been removed from his life, so he marries Dolores (instead (substitution 2). Significantly, however, Dolores does not spend her wedding night with Pedro, but sends Eduviges Dyada in her place (substitution 3). The substitutionary nature of the rite of marriage is even more apparent in Pedro's second marriage, this time to the initially desired Susana. In this marriage he first replaces her father insofar as he has him killed so that she will be forced to come to him. The undertones of an incestuous relationship between Susana and Bartolomé make this substition even more pertinent. Secondly, he, Pedro, replaces the true love of her life, Florencio, just as Dolores had replaced, temporarily at least, his love, Susana. That we are never sure if Florencio existed within the confines of the fiction, and outside of the limits of Susana's mind, is not relevant. And, similar substitutions are apparent in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz.* Because Catalina's brother dies in «Artemio's place», the latter is able to go to her father and replace the former, usurping his power and essentially his position, at the same time as he forcibly replaces her sweetheart, Ramón. In a parallel manner, Catalina is clearly a replacement in Artemio's life for Regina, the one woman he had loved unreservedly.

But, these substitutions must be examined with more rigor if they are to strictly fit the structure of the sacrificial ritual, for the so-called victim must not only be a substitute but must also be marginal to that society which he or she is «saving» with his or her sacrifice. Since we have already suggested that the women are the sacrificial victims and that the marriage is the sacrificial rite, let us look specifically at the women who are married in these texts. Do they fit the criteria for sacrificial victims as defined by Girard?

It seems clear that in each case, the female's position as female makes her marginal to society while at the same time her family ties make her a suitable representative for the family (thus, she has some identity with the society involved). The females' marginality to the societies portrayed in the novels may be best evinced by the female victims' patent lack of power and lack of authority. They have no say in their own destinies; all is decided for them by familial males. Catalina yields relatively facilely to the demand of her father («Los ojos de ella solo le devolvían este extraño mensaje de dura fatalidad, como si se mostrara dispuesta a aceptarlo todo . . .» [p. 41]), and even Susana

is eventually overpowered by the will of Pedro. Perhaps the point is manifested most blatantly in the character of Dolores who, although not under the tutelage of a male, nonetheless, conducts herself as if she were, for she willingly and in fact desirously hands herself over to Pedro. But, of this we shall have more to say later.

Now, clearly, the females' lack of power and authority is closely tied to the act of substitution. Unquestionably, the bent of their rapport with the males of their families is repeated when those familial males are replaced, via the ritual of marriage, by extra-familial males. And, interestingly, the female characters in these novels are not completely oblivious to the substitutory nature of the ritual. They recognize that nothing is truly changing; the rite only marks the presence of a different male to control their lives. The underlying implications of unusual relationships - we are tempted here to use the word incestuous but that may be too strong an expression[5] - between Catalina and her brother and between Susana and her father, further underline the fact that the family rapport is merely a mirror reflection of the marital. The similarity of the position and attitude of the female in each of the two relationships is manifest quite patently in the novels. In *Pedro Páramo,* Susana remembers the scene with her father when she was lowered into a «pequeño agujero abierto entre las tablas» (p. 94) where she «estaba colgada de aquella soga que le lastimaba la cintura, que le sangraba sus manos; pero que no quería soltar: era como el único hilo que la sostenía al mundo de afuera» (p. 94), and «ella bajó en columpio, meciéndose en la profundidad, con sus pies bamboleando 'en el no encuentro dónde poner los pies'» (p. 94). This scene is clearly not distant from those scenes in the bedroom at Pedro's house: «Y se volvió a hundir entre la sepultura de sus sábanas» (p. 115). In both cases we might see Susana metaphorically buried alive and connected to reality by a mere thread as a result of the greed and desire of, first her father, and then Pedro. Catalina's life before and after her marriage to Artemio is also portrayed as nearly identical. Describing her life before the ritual, the text notes, «Gonzalo había muerto. Desde entonces, padre e hija se habían ido acercando hasta convertir este lento discurrir de las tardes, sentados sobre las sillas de mimbre del patio, en algo más que una consolación: en una costumbre que, según el viejo, habría de prolongarse hasta su muerte» (p. 48), and after her marriage, «Ella se mecía lentamente. Recordaba, contaba días y a menudo meses durante los cuales sus labios no se abrieron» (p. 96); «'Inmóvil y muda'» (p. 99); «Largas horas pasó frente a la ventana abierta sobre el campo, perdida en la contemplación del valle sombreado de pirules, meciendo a veces la cuna del niño» (p. 104). Thus,

we see that the substitution is patent insofar as the females' lives are essentially unvaried. They are at the whim of a different male, but nothing is truly altered.

Thus, the females of these novels meet the criteria Girard has established for victims of ritual sacrifice: the victims are chosen for their simultaneous identification with and separation from the being they replace, while the true meaning of the ritual, which is the prevention of greater violence, is hidden in each case. Girard's study, however, seemingly directly contradicts our premise here to the extent that he begins his study by insisting that women are rarely sacrificial victims (p. 12). Within the context in which he states this, he is no doubt correct, for he is specifically speaking of a much more grandiose, large-scale sacrifice - a sacrifice in which a majority of the society actively and simultaneously participates and which results in the death or mutilation of the victim. On the other hand, he seems to overlook the fact that the female (particularly as dramatized in these novels) is regularly «sacrificed», handed over by her family via the marriage rite. Nonetheless, it is not irrevelant that in a study of violence and the sacred, Girard does include a chapter on marriage and, indeed, studies sexuality as a form of violence which is «cleansed» to some degree by marriage although «Even within the *ritualistic* framework of marriage . . . sexuality is accomplished by violence» (p. 35, my emphasis), and «Like violence, sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible», a statement which might be directly applicable to Pedro Páramo and Artemio. He later asks, now seeming to support our position, «whether this process of symbolization does not respond to some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women» (p. 36), noting that «the function of ritual is to 'purify' violence» by eliminating one member of society associated with that violence (i.e. the female?). Similarly, in our novels the female is blamed in each case for the continued violence. As a result, Artemio Cruz notes that the female is to blame for all that is amiss in the male world and reaches the extreme of labeling the generic female with a vulgarity: *la chingada*. He states, in fact, that it is «la chingada que envenena el amor, disuelve la amistad, aplasta la ternura ... que divide . . . que separa . . . que destruye . . . que emponzoña . . . » (p. 146). Thus, Artemio imputes to the female all the evils of contemporary life, but what he overlooks, what is buried in the rhetoric, is a very simple fact: the term itself, *la chingada*, means she who has been brutally, forcefully violated. The wrong, the evil, has been done *to* her not *by* her. Ironically, she is not the ravisher, the despoiler, as

Artemio's tirade would imply, but rather the ravished, the despoiled, as even the term itself suggests, and it is this paradoxical position of the female character which is dramatized in both Mexican novels: the evils of the male protagonists (or males and society in general) are imputed directly or indirectly to the female, while she is merely a scapegoat or target for his own failure or violence. Again, this leads us back to Girard's definition of sacrifice. Similarly, in *Pedro Páramo,* Donis' sister (who apparently has no name) is blamed for their incestuous relationship and censured by all. It is *she* who is marked by sin, *she* whom the bishop admonishes, *she* who dissolves into mud before Juan's eyes. It would appear, if we are to judge by the reactions of the other characters, that Donis, her partner in this transgression, is somehow less reprehensible. And, do we not presume that Artemio and Pedro might have been less cruel-hearted and more humane in their dealings with others had they received the love and affection they «deserved» from Catalina and Susana (or Regina and Dolores)?

Further contradicting his stance on women, Girard finally states:

> Like the animal and the infant, but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternately elevated and abused, (pp. 141-142)

Thus, the sacrificial victim is simultaneously hated and adored because she always lacks power and authority, but the rite of sacrifice itself confers certain powers, although ultimately no authority, on her. In a paradoxical manner, the victim, like the prostituted female characters of pornography as discussed by Andrew Dworkin and Elizabeth Janeway, takes on the powers of a goddess who is simultaneously an object of scorn *and* veneration and who must accept her «noble» position of victim and submit willingly in order to sanctify, ennoble, and justify the actions of her sacrificer.[6] Later, when she has been converted into a semi-goddess figure, she can then absolve the guilt of her sacrificer(s). As Floyd Merrill has noted, «Her [Catalina's] secret aim is to sacrifice herself for her father and her brother, to lose herself in 'godliness' so that others (the Other) might vicariously receive retribution.»[7] Like the pharmakos studied by Girard, «the victim draws into itself all the violence infecting the original victim [in this case, the male protagonist] and through it own death [or perhaps the rite itself] transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance» (p. 95). The catch is, of

course, that the sacrificers must somehow «partake», so to speak, of the death. In the case of the sacrificed animal, they eat of the meat; in the case of a sacrified person, who is only metaphorically rather than actually killed, the victim must absolve the sacrificers so that the latter will be «cleansed» of their own violence.

Thus, we see that to both Artemio and Pedro the forgiveness of the victims, Catalina and Susana, is essential but not forthcoming. In fact, one of the narrative sections of *Artemio Cruz,* June 3, 1924, is dedicated to Artemio's attempts to secure this very forgiveness and acceptance by Catalina: «El deseaba borrar el recuerdo del origen y hacerse querer sin memorias del acto que la obligó a tomarlo por esposo» (p. 101). He, in fact, tells her, «no sé si te haya ofendido en algo. Si lo he hecho, te ruego que me perdones» (p. 105), because «todos necesitamos testigos de nuestra vida para poder vivirla» (p. 110). Nonetheless, she astutely recognizes that she must «dejarse victimar para poder desquitarse» (p. 113). In fact, the difference between Artemio's relationship with Catalina and that with Regina is marked by the latter's ready forgiveness (and willing lapse of memory) regarding the violence of their first encounter. Both Artemio and Regina *pretend* that they met on a beautiful beach: «esa playa mítica, que nunca existió . . . esa mentira de la niña adorada . . . esa ficción de un encuentro junto al mar, inventado por ella *para que él se sintiera limpio, inocente,* seguro del amor . . . era una hermosa mentira» (p. 82, my emphasis). But, the ugly truth of the violent encounter is that «aquella muchacha de dieciocho años había sido montada *a la fuerza* en un caballo y *violada* en silencio en el dormitorio común de los oficiales» (pp. 82-83, my emphasis). It was this playacting, this pretense, this lie which would result in the forgiveness that Catalina refuses to grant him in response to his «divídate de este día» (p. 112). Significantly, as Roberto González Echevarría has underlined, «el poder y la voluntad de Artemio no logran dominar dos aspectos cruciales en su vida: el amor, que solo puede comprar, y la muerte, contra la cual lucha en vano,»[8] and, as we have shown, these two, love and death, are distinctly feminine related.

Thus, in these novels, when the female is seen as powerful, it is because of the covert power she holds by refusing to forgive the violence done her and thereby inspiring both love and hatred. Apparently, she, like Oedipus as studied by Girard, goes willingly to the sacrifice, knowing that it will make of her a goddess and confer on her otherwise inaccessible powers. As Catalina recognizes, «Solo podía vengarse esa muerte [her brother's] . . . abrazando a este hombre, abrazándolo pero negando la ternura que él quisiera encontrar en ella. Matándolo en vida, destilando la amargura hasta envenenarlo» (p. 53),

because she must «dejarse victimar para poder desquitarse», and ultimately «el sacrificio exigido sería pequeño y, en cierta manera, no muy repulsivo» (p. 50).

Much of Girard's study, then, points to the final step which he never takes but which seems clearly suggested by our novels: that marriage, particularly as presented in these novels, is indeed a form of ritual sacrifice to the extent that 1) sexuality and violence are interchangeable; 2) marriage is an approved ritual form of violence ; 3) the female is given to the other group or individual to prevent a greater form of violence. At the same time and significantly, the rite itself, the marriage ceremony, is glaringly absent in each of the two texts. Not a word is mentioned about the ceremony itself as it maintains its «hidden» and secret position.

In summary, then both *Pedro Páramo* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* have been described as the story of the death of the cacique, who, in spite of having destroyed the lives of all those who surrounded him, still failed to realize fulfillment because he never fully conquered nor possessed that ideal woman who eternally escaped him.[9] In light of the Girard study, however, we must now also view the novels as the dramatization of the ritual sacrifice designed to cover and redirect the basic violence inherent to mankind just as the Mexican vulgarity, *la chingada,* covers and refocuses that same violence. Like la Malinche, the women of these novels are simultaneously despised and adored because of their role within the sacrificial ritual, a role which makes of them a goddess as well as a symbol of death and a mediator of the same. Just as la Malinche is viewed as the Mother of the Mexican mestizo *and* a traitor to her people (thus, the instrument of the death of her race), the female characters in these two novels have been intricately linked to the death the male protagonists cannot negate. Like the sacrificial victim she is and like the pharmakos and Oedipus, the female character, *la chingada,* is blamed for all that is evil in man and stands as a reflection of that same evil. More importantly, because she refuses to forgive him that evil, he is denied the positive reflection of himself that he needs to survive. Her sacrifice then has been necessary so that order, peace, and hierarchal differentiations can continue to reign; but like death, violence and chaos continue to exist, merely hidden below the thin mask of order, for her failure to forgive makes of her, ironically, a magnifying mirror of man's own negative aspects. Ultimately, then, the very act of sacrifice in these two novels becomes one more absurd gesture since, ironically, no one is saved by that sacrifice.

NOTES

1 Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1969); Carlos Fuentes, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1970). All pages references are from these editions.

2 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977).

3 Although he has not delved deeply into the subject, Lanin Gyurko has recognized Fuentes' characters, particularly Regina and Catalina, as sacrificial victims. See «Women in Mexican Society: Fuentes' Portrayal of Oppression» ,i?evw to *Hispánica Moderna,* 38 (1974-1975), 206-229.

4 Robert P. Matthews is one of the few commentators of Fuentes' work who addresses the question of violence. Although he does not analyze it from our point of view, he does note that «La violencia indiscriminada penetra a todos los niveles de la sociedad mexicana» and suggests that Fuentes sees the history of Mexico as «una sucesión de actos violentos». See «Las ideas de Carlos Fuentes: Desde lo mexicano hasta lo universal», *Revista Nacional de Cultura,* 201 (noviembre-diciembre 1971), 47-60. Matthews tends to view the violence, however, in much the same manner as the characters inasmuch as he overlooks the basic violence of the texts and sees instead only certain manifestations.

5 The incestuous nature of the relationship between Susana and Bartolomé is confirmed on pages 91-94 when she speaks of the cat who later proves to be an incarnation of her father, by saying, «Durmió conmigo entre mis piernas . . . » (p. 92). On pages 93-94 in the middle of the discussion on the cat, she is informed of the death of her father and responds, «Entonces era él . . .»

José de la Colina has also noted the incestuous relationship between Susana and her father, observing that when the two returned to Cómala their relationship was thought to be that of husband and wife not father and daughter. See «Susana San Juan, el mito femenino *en Pedro Páramo», Universidad de Mexico,* 19 (abril 1965).

6 See Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974) and Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman sPlace* (New York: Dell, 1971).

7 See «Communication and Paradox in Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz:* Toward a Semiotics of Character», *Semiótica,* 18 (1976), 339-60.

8 See «La *muette de Artemio Cruz* y Unamuno: una fuente de Fuentes», *Cuadernos Americanos, 111* (julio-agosto 1971), p. 200.

Significantly, too, Gonzalez is one of the few critics who has referred to the possibility that Artemio is a twin, a fact which would tie the novel even more closely to Girard's theory of sacrifice.

9 Gyurko, too, has observed that Artemio (not unlike Pedro Páramo) builds his economic empire in an attempt to compensate for the loss of Regina («Women in Mexican Society . . .», p. 209).