

***Paralelismos transatlánticos: Postcolonialismo y narrativa femenina en América Latina y África del Norte.* Cranston: INTI, 1996.**

Silvia Nagy-Zekmi's *Paralelismos transatlánticos: Postcolonialismo y narrativa femenina en América Latina y África del Norte* (195 pages with abundant critical bibliography), presents the reader with a convincing case for comparative and interdisciplinary studies of Latin America and the Maghreb, as Northern Africa is sometimes called. Although it relies principally on literary texts, *Paralelismos Transatlánticos* interweaves its subject matter with questions touching upon women's studies, sociology, and Third World politics. The compelling richness of Nagy-Zekmi's effort arises, however, from her meticulous research and innovative critical approach. Indeed, the move away from literary canons that are fixed by language or nationality breaks new ground for research focusing on Latin America or Northern Africa, in fields as diverse as literature, anthropology, and philosophy. *Paralelismos transatlánticos* is therefore a fortunate resource for the informed reader: it includes a thorough and knowledgeable account of contemporary postcolonial theory and criticism and so should be of benefit for future studies in this field.

In her Introduction, Nagy-Zekmi explains that her intention is to carry out a comparative study of literature written by women in Latin America and Northern Africa from a postcolonial perspective. In a clever fashion, she names her Introduction "Las hermanas de Sherazada" (Scheherazade's Sisters), and thereby immediately links Northern Africa with Latin America through a shared, but symbolic, linguistic transgression, that of a woman who should remain silent, but nonetheless speaks. Such are the authors of Nagy-Zekmi's texts. In both literatures, she argues, women's voices have been doubly marginalized and, hence, been kept forcibly on the periphery, with, in some cases, no other option but to adopt a male voice in order to be accepted and heard. Concurrently, *Paralelismos transatlánticos* presents abundant examples of transatlantic cultural influences that have enabled shared artistic expressions. Therefore, Nagy-Zekmi states that "el mutuo interés y el intento de intercambio literario entre las dos áreas me dio la inspiración necesaria para escribir este libro" (14) (mutual interest and an

attempt for a literary exchange between the two areas gave me the necessary inspiration to write this book). Following the Introduction, the book is divided into six chapters: I. Paralelismos transatlánticos y la decolonización del discurso femenino (Transatlantic Parallelisms and the Decolonization of Feminine Discourse); II. El género autobiográfico (The Autobiographical Genre); III. Los modelos del poder patriarcal (Models of Patriarchal Power); IV. La contrahistoria femenina (Feminine Counter-History); V. El exilio y otras formas de desplazamiento (Exile and Other Forms of Displacement); and VI. Representación postcolonial y escritura femenina (Postcolonial Representation and Feminine Writing).

Each chapter presents well known Latin American female authors such as Elena Poniatowska, Gioconda Belli, Laura Esquivel, and Isabel Allende, side by side with other female voices who, though they have been the subject of Latin American scholarship, have remained relatively unknown to mainstream readers. Among these latter is Adriana Lassel, an author whose work highlights the difficulties and intricacies involved in speaking with and of a united Latin American female voice. Indeed, Nagy-Zekmi's discussion of Lassel's writings expresses an opposition to any so-called "solidaridad femenina" (34) (feminine solidarity) which pretends to unite Latin American women of all social classes. In this analysis, Nagy-Zekmi puts her finger on a very controversial issue in Latin American literature written by women, one that has, at times, been ignored by scholars. Not only do Latin American women live and work under the subjugating grip of male authority, but their behavior is also forcefully circumscribed by the rigid categories of social class and social codes, each of which serve to separate supposedly united "sisters." Thus, the Latin American female voice always struggles to be heard at many levels. The complexity of this basic and incontrovertible fact is tackled forthrightly by Nagy-Zekmi in the individual chapters of her book.

*Paralelismos transatlánticos* clearly presents Latin American scholars with a very valuable comparison area for research, that is, the Maghreb, (in this case denoting authors from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria). Like its treatment of Latin American literature, *Paralelismos transatlánticos* studies the literary efforts of Northern African female authors, such as Fadhma Amrouche, Alifa Rifaat, and Assia Djebar. Djebar's work, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, is profitably juxtaposed with Gioconda Belli's *La mujer habitada* in Chapter four, "La contrahistoria femenina" (Feminine Counter-History), where the critic examines how, in both texts, a counter history expresses itself alongside an official history whose function is to bury the voices of the underprivileged. As Nagy-Zekmi's reading amply demonstrates, Belli and Djebar's narrations struggle to defy the languages of the oppressors, Spanish and French, while at the same time they appropriate these languages in order to tell their own counter histories. *Paralelismos transatlánticos* highlights

the fact that the two female authors' voices are not just the voice of the "other" but, the author asserts, "en ambas novelas el discurso 'oficial' sobre la colonización se desplaza y se sustituye por el discurso del Otro, o más bien de la *Otra*" (126, emphasis mine) (in both novels, the 'official' discourse of colonization is displaced and substituted by the discourse of the Other, or rather, the *female other*). Since *Paralelismos transatlánticos* is written in Spanish, Nagy-Zekmi is able to powerfully underscore the unique status of the female "other," "la otra," of the texts she analyzes. She thereby reminds the reader that her criticism refers not only to a social and political oppression perpetrated by men but also to similar forms of oppression inflicted on women by women, according to their economic status.

In Chapter six, "Representación postcolonial" (Postcolonial Representation), Nagy-Zekmi provides the reader with a very useful list of the main points of confluence between Latin American and Northern African literature. The author considers the idea that "tanto la narrativa femenina de América Latina como la del Maghreb representa la lucha de las mujeres para 'construir' una identidad en sus personajes" (166) (Latin American feminine narrative, as well as that of the Maghreb represents the female struggle to 'construct' an identity through their characters). These women, in spite of their historical subjugation to male authority, are now altering their dependency on males, and, as a consequence, "la representación del sujeto femenino está cambiando: los personajes femeninos toman iniciativas y hacen decisiones en su vida" (166) (the representation of the feminine subject is changing: female characters take initiatives and make decisions about their lives). In this fashion, Nagy-Zekmi argues, Latin American and Northern African female authors, through their respective narratives, have come to subvert long-established female roles and thus to act in defiance, so as not to remain marginalized by a Eurocentric culture, repressive governments, a male-oriented society, and a small elite of very powerful women.

*Paralelismos transatlánticos* offers a great opportunity for Latin American scholars to become acquainted with the literature of the Maghreb. At the same time that it offers the reader a glimpse of the latest postcolonial theories, it allows for a very rich and multi-leveled reading of texts written by women. Nagy-Zekmi never compromises her point of view and at times goes against mainstream feminist criticism, underscoring in a very decisive voice the difficulties of defining the feminine subject (especially when it comes to nations that have been historically subjugated by an elite of men *and women*). Indeed, the legacy of subjugation by a male and a female elite is a very complicated and many-nuanced issue, and that is why Nagy-Zekmi cautions her readers not to become too dogmatic or polarized when analyzing texts written by women. For this very same reason, at the end of her text, Nagy-Zekmi warns us that, when approaching a feminine text, we must

recognize “las dimensiones multilingües, multiculturales y multiraciales de la escritura femenina” (170) (the multilingual, multicultural and multiracial dimensions of feminine writing).

**Patricia Vilches**  
University of Evansville