

# LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERS AND PROSTITUTES IN TWO STORIES BY JOSÉ REVUELTAS

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To quote this article:

Flores, M. (2019). Representación literaria de madres y putas en dos historias de José Revueltas. *Espacio I+D, Innovación más Desarrollo*. VIII (20), 69-83. doi: 10.31644/IMASD.20.2019.a04

— Abstract—

This paper focuses on the duality of female characters in two texts written by José Revueltas, an acclaimed Mexican writer devoted to denounce politics and social structures. The first story is *El apando*, a short novel, the second is “Dormir en tierra” a short story. First I will provide an overview about how women evolve in the last manuscripts and what concepts they are seen from the masculine eye and the female eye. That is to say, the way men and women are seen, will depend on their role: mother, life partner, prostitute, lesbian, worker, worker trafficker. The femininity, in Revueltas writings is not idealized as we were taught, thus motherhood is not something to be glorified, and the prostitute’s role is not judged or demonized either. In this cases, women characters will present nuances to which some are not accustomed to see and read. Especially, this paper will examine how mother and prostitute coexist despite the fact that, in the Mexican culture, they are not commonly found mixed in the same situation. Until now it seems impossible that a woman can be both, we are used that the maternal figure should not be presented with sexual charge in the same manner that a prostitute cannot exercise the rights of mother. Finally, we will see how the grotesque aesthetics of both Revueltas’ writings encompass not only the woman, whether mother, prostitute or the two of them, but also the rest of the characters as well.

### Keywords

*female representations; mother; prostitute.*

One of the most interesting and primary characteristics of José Revueltas' work lies in showing situations to the limit. These circumstances are framed in a grotesque and punctilious for the reader, who is overwhelmed by the brutal and stark information that shows in each corner of his narrative. Jorge Ruffinelli offers two stages in his narrative production, in the first statement: "Revueltas is learning to find himself: find a style, an anxious roll, hesitant, and a content of ideas that reflects the problematic existence of contemporary men" (Ruffinelli : 29) and begins with the publication of *Los muros de agua* (1941) to *Dormir en tierra* (1944); the second, starts with *Los terrenales* (1949) and concludes with the publication of *El Apando* (1969), Ruffinelli states that this second stage "[...] defines a thorough narrator, owner of an expressive, powerful, challenging vehicle and safe in a universe unmistakably his" (Ruffinelli: 29). José Revueltas creates and constructs, from his first novel, a narrative universe of his own, where social political concern, alienation and isolation, as well as loneliness and desolation, will be resources that will define each of his characters.

*El Apando* is one of Revueltas' most read novels, in spite of its brevity, in it aesthetic and political worries come together. To Vicente Francisco Torres, in this short novel José Revueltas' narrative and philosophical concerns appear, in which Torres identifies in three basic points:

1. The painful and sickening deformity as an eminently human sign that carries with it the lucidity of the thinking matter known as destruction.
2. The idea of the world as a universal prison, issue that according to Revueltas, grants fatalism luck to the human life, where men can be fulfilled only by acquiring consciousness of his extinction, his instability and assume death as a loving act.
3. Men's alienation by his own scientific conquests.  
[...] (Torres: 94-95).

In an exemplary way, Revueltas' narrative shows that we are all *apandados* and that this cell is an allegory of society, in which each man lives under a series of norms, principles and identities that constrain him, and in other cases, grant him an apparent freedom. *Apandarse* then, not only alludes to the physical space, but in general terms to all the oppression marks that submit the human existence. The author's literature suggests this vision in order to dismantle the political system of his time, as well as to recreate his stay in prison and pose to the reader all the infamies and violations suffered by the prisoners. His stay in prison worked very well to expose the paradoxes of a larger area, such as the case of Latin American politics and society.

This type of literature, which we might call prison, places the reader in front of a series of uncomfortable images that, far from showing him a foreign space, question him about his own existence. *El Apando's* characters

live in a small cell, but in turn they are prisoners of their society and their bodies. This analogy is well indicated at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator quotes the following about the guards:

The monkeys were held there, only them, female and male monkey; well, male and male, both in their cage, still without despair, without despairing at all, with their steps from end to end, detained but in motion, trapped by the zoological scale as if someone, others, humanity, impiously no longer wanted to take care of their business, the fact of them being monkeys, of which on the other hand they did not want to know either, monkeys at the end, or they did not know nor wanted to, imprisoned in any sense that you looked at them, caged inside the drawer of two-story bars, inside the blue cloth suit and bright rosette over the head, within their coming and going without training, natural, however fixed, without taking the step that could make them leave the interspecies where they moved, walked, copulated, cruel and without memory, female and male monkey in Paradise, identical, of the same hair and of the same sex, but female and male, imprisoned, fucked. [...] More prisoners than Polonio, more prisoners than Albino, more prisoners than *El Carajo* (11-13).

Later, the narrator insists on human degradation, going from the general to the particular and conically refers to the guards who have a level of imprisonment, even greater, than the prisoners themselves:

So stupid as to not realize that the prisoners were them and not anyone else, with everything and their mothers and their children and the parents of their parents. They thought they were born to watch, spy and look around, so that no one could get out of their hands, or from that city and those streets with bars, [...] they said and thought to eat and to eat in their homes where the family of monkeys danced, screamed, boys and girls and the woman, [...] Everything was a failure to notice anything. Of life. Without realizing it, they were there in this drawer, husband and wife, husband and husband, wife and children, father and father, children and parents, terrified and universal monkeys (13-14).

What does the narrator mean when he alludes the idea of the drawer? Why are the guards, these vigilant monkeys, more stubborn than Polonius, Albino or *El Carajo*? The novel offers an easy answer: the apparent freedom of the wardens is no more than a subjection to a regime that scourges life as much or more than the prison itself. The quote maintains, in turn, a close relationship with the theme of identity: the representation of each of the roles assigned socially and culturally, with the aim of gaining prestige and maintaining an adequate relationship with the environment.

This is a good starting point to delve into the topic that concerns us here: the representation of the feminine in Revueltas' work, especially in *El apando* and "Dormir en tierra". In the case of the first text, we see that the approach of the feminine/masculine gender device is more than explicit, on top of that it congregates at different levels, both corporal and intangible, the marks established by a certain convention. The prison, as an analogy of the society, refers to the space in which the subjectivity of the characters is constructed and the way in which they interact and express their actions.

For example, each of *El Apando's* characters "suffers" an indelible imprint created after a cluster of representations that determines them to live in this or that way. In an extraordinary way, both from the aesthetic point of view and from the anecdote, the novel does not discriminate on the subject of subjection: from the perspective of the narrator, each individual is described in a fenced environment, degraded internally and externally; no possibility of redemption.

To begin with, Revueltas transgresses the narrative order by describing his characters in the form of animals; this implies a destruction of its symmetry, whether bodily or in a state of mind; since the balance of human and natural proportions is violated. In that sense we could say that there is a certain equity in the degraded assessment of being a man or being a woman; perhaps because this is how the human condition is perceived in the narrative world of Revueltas. From this perspective, the representation of the female characters attracts attention: the sense that acquires their doing and acting in relation to the other characters; that is, the way in which their subjectivity manifests itself along the narrative journey.

In some cases, the female characters drive the story, condition the anecdote and close the actions. Through them, the rupture of the social and cultural order that connotes the feminine is expressed, in the middle of a deformed reality that becomes a referent of itself and skips all the barriers of referential equilibrium, about the representation of the image that society tries to build for itself. Such is the case of the imaginary related to two stereotyped representations of women: as a mother and as a prostitute, the two faces of being a woman in Mexican society, be it good or bad woman. Marcela Lagarde adds another imaginary: madness in women:

Women possess the subaltern power, of the dominated. From specialization in a small area of life and the world, discover and deploy their strength. Consecrated women possess the positive power emanating from the spirit, and mothers develop the power derived from motherhood, prostitutes have the negative power that emanates from their erotic body and from evil, and mad women from delirium and unreason face their destructive power, the power of the norm (Lagarde: 199).

Madness in women, from the point of view of Lagarde, defies the normativity sheltered by their mental state; challenge that translates into behaviors that transgress established roles. For Octavio Paz, the stereotyped functions of the feminine and the masculine result from the indigenous and Spanish cultural heritage where the role of women has been objectified and seen as simple:

[...] instrument, either of the desires of man, or of the purposes assigned to her by law, society or morals. Purposes, it must be said, about which her consent has never been asked and in which she participates only passively, as a "depository" of certain values. Prostitute, goddess, great lady, lover, the woman transmits or preserves, but does not create, the values and energies entrusted to her by nature or society. In a world made at the image of men, women are only a reflection of the will and want of men. Passive, she becomes goddess, beloved, being that embodies the stable and ancient elements of the universe: the earth, mother and virgin; active, it is always function, medium, channel. Femininity is never an end in itself, as is manhood (Peace: 12 and 13).

In contrast to the masculine, in Western culture, passivity is associated with the feminine, which makes women a subordinated subject and socially and culturally impeded to express their true desires; mainly when these are related to the exercise of their sexuality, Paz adds:

It is curious to note that the image of the "bad woman" almost always comes along with the idea of activity. Unlike the "self-sacrificing mother", the "waiting bride" and the hermetic idol, static beings, the "bad" comes and goes, looks for men, abandons them. [...] its extreme mobility makes it invulnerable. Activity and impudence join forces in her and end up petrifying her soul. The "bad woman" is hard, impious, independent, like the "macho". By different ways, she also transcends her physiology and closes herself to the world (14)

The case of the female characters in Revueltas' work is highly paradigmatic. The narrator raises the prison for some of the protagonist men -Polonio, Albino and *El Carajo*-; however, for women, despite living in freedom, there is also a direct signal to the fact of the prison: Meche, *La Chata* and the mother of *el Carajo* are subject to constant scrutiny, which ranges from the revisions by the guards, until their conception of the world. The first two live in an area that often objectifies them and makes them participants in the fantasies of others, although in their own way, they also desire and turn others into an erotic object, especially their secluded husbands. For example, when Polonio imagines *La Chata* being touched by the warden, at the same time that he gets angry, he cannot control the arousal that comes from recreating the images and the sensations that are generated by the encounter between the two women:

The memory and the idea blinded Polonio's mind with jealousy, but total strangers, a kind of not being able to be in space, not meeting, not giving himself with his own limits, ambiguous, stripped, jealousy in his throat and in the solar plexus, with a tingling sensation, loose and atrocious, involuntary, behind the penis, like some previous ejaculation, not true, a kind of contact without semen, that fluttered, vibrated in tiny, microscopic, tangible circles, beyond the body, outside of any organism, and *La Chata* appeared before his eyes, jocund, beastly, with her thighs whose lines, instead of coming together to impinge on the cradle of sex, when she joined the legs, still left on the contrary a small hollow separated between the two walls of solid skin, tense, young, shuddering (21-22).

Also interesting is the homoerotic feminine wink in the process of auscultation carried out by the women guards in Meche's body: "[...] because she was already here, inexorable, diligent, thumb and forefinger of the keeper who would open her lips, while suddenly, with the middle finger, began a suspicious exploration inside, kind and delicate, in a leisurely come and go, eyes completely still until death" (28). On her part, Meche "[...] did not allow herself to be a pimp, she was an honest woman, a thug, yes, but when she slept with other men she did not do it for money, nothing more for pleasure, without Albino knowing, of course. So she had slept with Polonius many times. She was pleasing, very much pleasing, but she was honest" (24). It is obvious that in the female representation of these two women, the narrator highlights how attractive the exercise of their body is. Although they are not whores, their erotic practice transgresses the role assigned to the configuration that is culturally granted to women in the Mexican environment.

But it is with Carajo's mother that the narrator rejoices, especially in the descriptive field. In the same way that for Meche and *La Chata*, the weight of the social -and it could be said of the prison- lies in the erotic space and the adjudication of a role. In the case of *Carajo's* mother it is given under a panorama accentuated by the fact of the relationship she has with her son, where the corporality is closer to the grotesque and where the erotic is apparently denied. For Marcela Lagarde the mother: "[...] contributes to the generic conformation of roles, activities, identities, forms of behavior, attitudes and needs" (378). In fact, *Carajo*, from the descriptive point of view, is incarnated as an extension of the mother. *Carajo's* mother is raised within a strange duality. From the beginning the narrator describes it mercilessly in the following way:

Surprisingly as ugly as her son, with the trace of a knife that went from her eyebrow to the tip of her chin, she remained with a low and stubborn gaze, without looking at him or at anything other than the ground, the attitude full of rancor, reproaches and remorse, God knows in what sordid and abject circum-

stances she would have joined, and with whom, to engender him, and perhaps the memory of that distant and gloomy fact tormented her more and more (16-17).

The construction of the ideal of motherhood appears confusingly confined to the realm of the sordid, completely removed from the parameters of the "home's angel" or the "little white head" created by Mexican society. For these reasons, the vision of a duplicity between mother and child emerges: *Carajo's* mother is an older woman (besides being a mother herself), both identity marks create the idea of respect; however, in turn, she is a woman whose past is related to prostitution as *cliché*. On the other hand, the body of the mother in our culture always appears hidden and reserved, a situation that is subverted in *El Apando* to be granted a very unusual activity for her time: to move drugs inside her vagina in order to satisfy the need of her son. Revueltas is very close to a very intimate fiber of the fabric of Mexican society: take the body of the mother and make it the object of a "criminal" act. Irremediably there is an analogy with procreation, since the image reminds us so much to think about *Carajo's* birth, as in the vicissitudes of his upbringing. We have then a woman who, far from procreating a child again, "gives birth" a small package of drugs. The body is changed and given such prison qualities as those that characterize the social sphere. In the end, the action performed by the mother is nothing more than a continuity of the affective relationship with her child and the dependence load that she manifests towards him.

The change alone generates a situation of broad questioning of the symbolic networks that make the individual a subject engaged in the "prison of society", that is, *apandado*. The proposal articulated by the narrator is equivalent to putting into question all these principles using the exhibition plan and at the same time that of subversion: if the mother is able to do "anything" for her son, she will also be able to violate her morality.

On the other hand, there is the direct pointing to the erotic representation of the mother, when the barrier of respect disappears, socially speaking. In this case, the transport of the drug in her vagina is an obvious subversion; however, there is another indication that is also denoted: the idea of how *Carajo* was conceived. Because of the information that the narrator provides, it is clear that this woman had a very dynamic and frequent sexual life during her youth. The scope for motherhood and, indirectly, for sexuality is integrated in the same conception of the feminine. A reference to this plane of the mother is when in the visiting room the characters contemplate Albino's tattoo:

(...) but Meche could not get away from her mind, precisely, Albino's dance, a week before, in the defenders room, as soon as they finished making the last



details of the first plan, from which had failed because of the *apando*, and the mother of *El Carajo* contemplated the contortions of the tattoo with the air of not understanding, but with a sly smile on her lips, very capable of still making love the old mule, despite her nearly sixty-odd years (26).

For *Carajo's* mother, age does not matter, but reliving part of the experiences through memory. The "sly smile on her lips" reveal the erotic experiences of the old woman. Another circumstance that should be noted with respect to this character consists of that unusual relationship with her son. In some contradictory way, the mother establishes a love-hate relationship with *el Carajo*, since she is capable of taking risks by supplying the drug, but at the same time reproaches the birth of the latter: "The fault is no one's, but *mine*, for having had you" (17). In this sentence, the mother assumes herself as responsible for the acts committed by her son and for being submerged in an unpleasant environment, as the narrator further delimits it:

*None*, this sad plural. No one was to blame, fate, life, fucking luck, *none*. For having you. The rage of having now *El Carajo* locked up with them in the same cell, next to Polonio and Albino, and the acute desire, imperious, supplicating, that he died and finally stopped rolling in the world with that degraded body. The mother also wanted it with equal force, with the same anxiety, she saw herself. Die, die, die. It raised a mercy full of disgust and anger (17).

In the case of *La Chata* and *Meche*, the call of corporality is much clearer, in addition to not facing too many paradoxes as in the configuration of *el Carajo's* mother. These two women represent the incarnation of a more traditional beauty, opposed to the grotesque characterization of the first two characters. The first one that appears in the novel is *La Chata*, who is immediately described with an accelerated and vehement eroticism, in order to highlight her attractive corporality:

*La Chata* reclining on the balcony, on her back, her naked body under a light dressing gown and her legs slightly ajar, the mount of Venus as a capital of hair on the two columns of her thighs -that was impossible to resist and Polonius, with the same sensations of being possessed by a religious trance, he knelt shaking to kiss it and to sink his lips between her lips (22).

*Meche's* description, on the other hand, is more concise and less poetic: "She was pleasing, very much pleasing, but she was honest, whatever each person's business is" (24). The two characters enact the most exalted incarnation of the feminine in terms of the erotic field and, in turn, act in a similar way to *Carajo's* mother by providing their respective partners, Polonio and Albino, the satisfaction they get with the supply of drugs, given

that the impossibility of introducing themselves the "package", they teach how to do it to the old woman, *El Carajo's* mother. This gesture implies a certain subversion of the traditional roles assigned to the feminine and, beyond this circumstance that could be transitory, it acquires a completely active lining in terms of the conception of their sexuality.

It is noteworthy that the narrator follows, in most cases, the drives of Albino and Polonio regarding the memory of their women; however, there is also interest in the erotic recesses of Meche and *La Chata*, as they decide to exchange their partners and satisfy their wishes. On the other hand, there is the evidence of homoerotic relationships, which although they do not reach a space of fullness, are very important. They are given, as mentioned above, by the review carried out by the warders (the monkeys) to the women before entering the prison, with the intention that they do not introduce drugs: "They stick their finger in us. Monkeys daughters of bitches, you lesbian bastards" (23). This fact causes anger between Albino and Polonio, because they experience jealousy when imagining the scene, especially in the case of the last character:

The memory and the idea blinded Polonio's mind with jealousy, but total strangers, a kind of not being able to be in space, not meeting, not giving himself with his own limits, ambiguous, stripped, jealousy in his throat and in the solar plexus, with a tingling sensation, loose and atrocious, involuntary, behind the penis, like some previous ejaculation, not true, a kind of contact without semen, that fluttered, vibrated in tiny, microscopic, tangible circles, beyond the body, outside of any organism, and *La Chata* appeared before his eyes, jocund, beastly, with her thighs whose lines, instead of coming together to impinge on the cradle of sex, when she joined the legs, still left on the contrary a small hollow separated between the two walls of solid skin, tense, young, shuddering (22).

Contrary to the thoughts of Polonio and Albino, for Meche, the homoerotic approach becomes more palpable when the warder begins the revision, because it updates the memory and builds the image of her first sexual encounter with Albino, scene that allows her to enjoy this process.

If in the field of sexuality the female characters acquire this facet, their performance in front of the confinement of their partners in the punishment cell experiences a similar trance. Meche and *La Chata*, observing that Polonio and Albino are in the camp and that they will not be able to have access to the visit, start a revolt that spreads throughout the prison and ends with the brutal punishment carried out on these last two. During this fact, both, with the purpose of unleashing their fury on the guards who hit their partners, are directly involved in the dispute:

The women, impotent on the other side of the fence, shouted like demons, kicked the nearest attendant and pulled the hair that fell for a moment nearby, to pluck strands whose roots bled with whitish pieces of scalp (53-54).

The performance of these women is in correspondence with the way in which they are represented from their corporeality, which is undoubtedly one of the driving elements of the narrative.

However, in the case of "Sleeping on land" we see that the issue of prostitution is much more energetic than in *El Apando*. Each one of the women that appears in the story possesses the power of seduction and this power connotes the processes of construction of the feminine from an abjection desired by the male characters. As Marcela Lagarde affirms "In our culture, the ways of being men and women are qualified as sexual characteristics, and this consideration is part of the ideology that analyzes the human, as part of human nature" (Lagarde: 178). This is how in this story we see from the beginning the insinuation of the subject of sexuality and the constant exhibition of the female bodies that wait, at the age of the river, the arrival of the sailors who will be their clients for a few hours:

There were some of them at the top of their houses, astride the handrail at the top of the stairs, or leaning on one shoulder in the doorframe, with the ordinary cloth dresses that were wrapped around their naked bodies, absolutely sweat, panting, strange sacred and dirty cows, slow, idle, all with the same expression of hopeless boredom, wet (104).

This representation of the prostitute is a kind of *leitmotiv* throughout Mexican literature, since it always oscillates between what is desired and, at the same time, repudiated. The conception of prostitution is the antagonist of the identity of the mother; however in "Dormir en tierra" this antithesis disappears. With mastery, Revueltas blocks the separation between these two representations that could be antagonistic to make them a close event and whose contradiction could be null. It is in the character of La Chunca that this characterization is synthesized, also associated with a vision about the properties of beauty that a prostitute should possess. The physical description of women, as in most Revueltas narrative, is grotesque and degraded. As in the mother of *El Carajo* in *El apando*, La Chunca is ambivalent, if the origin of *El Carajo* is no one's fault; in this case the phrase, "I do not know why they did it!" (110), triggers feelings of love/resentment toward the abandoned son: "She looked at the creature a moment longer, with a tender and loving grudge, because all the unnerving sadness of the last hours had its origin in the unhappy presence of that child "(111).

Later, the narrator states in the child's voice: "She does not want to have me because I am a son of a bitch". This affirmation involves removing one of the most intimate fibers of the identity of the Mexican, which is very close to that posed by Octavio Paz in his famous book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*<sup>1</sup>. The maternity associated with prostitution generates a complex vision in the individual and moves in an area that plays with the sexuality and the domain established on the mother. The modesty that should be fulfilled by the mother figure is broken with the presence of this irrepressible and painful identity; with this, the proposed appointment generates a complete restlessness and, in the case of the story, more than related to an offense, it is anchored to the fact of being the son of a prostitute, a space that is also prone to discredit. However, there is a double allusion to the son when a "without work" lifts the skirt to La Chunca and makes an obscene caress that arouses the spiteful glee of surrounding males and females. "He fucks her," you could say. The child of "Dormir en tierra" would then be stigmatized doubly as a repulsive spawn of a whore who is also raped.

Thus, the insurmountable frontier between maternity and exorbitant sexuality, which immediately refers us to the prostitute's vision, remains a close rather than distant field and refers to the same essence: the construction of the feminine. As was said at the beginning, Revueltas emphasizes the breaking of the guidelines that shape a certain society, as in the case of the Mexican one, with the intention of showing the way in which each individual is subject to an accumulation of representations that define him and mark his activities in the world. Being subject to these networks, both in *El Apando* and in "Dormir en tierra," implies submitting to a certain domain of power that changes the conception of our body and destiny. At the same time, he emphasizes with wise and direct phrases, the way in which the author dismantles all this congregation of masks in order to show the man as he is. At this point the literature of José Revueltas acquires a profoundly testimonial value: although the presence of the fictional is remarkable, the relationship of this way of being in the world implies a reflection on one's own environment that cannot be understood if the author it is not directly related to it. This testimonial literature then allows a more intrinsic vision not only of the characters, but also the perceptions that we can have about them and about the world view that this narrative tries to give us.

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1 For a Mexican it is more infamous to be called "hijo de la chingada" than "hijo de puta": "La Chingada is the opened mother, raped or forcibly evicted. The 'hijo de la Chingada' is the spawn of rape, abduction or ridicule. If you compare this expression with the Spanish, 'hijo de puta', you immediately notice the difference. For the Spanish dishonor consists in being the son of a woman who voluntarily surrenders, a prostitute; for the Mexican, to be the fruit of a violation." Octavio Paz (87-88)

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