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The Hidden Feminist Progressive of Mistral



Gabriela Mistral
(April 1889- January 1957)

This essay focuses on Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean poet well-known throughout the world. Here, I focus on representations of maternity in her poetry, a selected analysis that comes from a larger work that is serving as my senior undergraduate thesis. My examination of Mistral is prompted by my interest in examining women of history who have had positive social impacts on their societies. This particular analysis of Mistral and her poetry aims to look at her representations of motherhood within a feminist theoretical framework where I argue that Mistral's passionate and frequent use of the trope of motherhood is feminist in its inclusivity.

Gabriela Mistral is a Chilean poet who is very well-known throughout the world. I focus on representations of maternity in her poetry, a selected analysis that comes from a larger work that is serving as my senior undergraduate thesis. My examination of Mistral is prompted by my interest in examining women of history who have had positive social impacts on women and their societies. As a well-known poet, Mistral writes with a female audience in mind. This particular analysis of Mistral and her poetry aims to look at her representations of motherhood within a feminist theoretical framework where I argue that Mistral's passionate and frequent use of the trope of motherhood is feminist in its inclusivity.

At first glance, Mistral seems like a very traditional poet. She has a respect and passion for the state of motherhood that sometimes leads to the apparent expression in her poetry of the belief that all women should be mothers. While some may read the role of women as mother as restricting to women's identity, radical cultural feminism theorizes women's role as mother as powerful and key to the women's very existence (Tong, 2009). Using a radical cultural feminist lens (Tong, 2009) helps us see Mistral's use of mother as a space of liberation where she employs the Virgin in order to spread the empowerment of motherhood to all women, even those who are biologically childless. Though this seems to follow patriarchal order, as male centered and women in a subservient role, I argue that Mistral is actually empowering women at the time because she sees the abstract state of motherhood as strong and meaningful for all women, not necessarily only those with children. Mistral's incorporation of most women as metaphorical mothers shows her alignment with radical cultural feminist thinking, in which women's capacity to reproduce is a central asset that separates women from patriarchal oppression. Unlike liberal feminist structures, which rely on rules and law as established in patriarchal modes,

radical cultural feminism does not reach for equal access to male privilege as a means to equality, rather, radical cultural feminists position power outside patriarchal structure. Using a radical cultural frame, women as reproducers can function as a variable that challenges patriarchal paradigms. Mistral's representation of motherhood as a space of power captures this radical cultural rendering.

Radical feminism came about in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's (Tong, 2009). Radical feminists believed that achieving equal rights for women was the ideal and that they wanted to achieve this in revolutionary ways (Tong, 2009). Radical feminists are distinct from a liberal individualist model of feminism in that they conceptualize women's reach for equality as broader in scope and identities and in ways that focus on disrupting the order/rules of society typically associated with liberal feminist causes. Radical cultural feminists encourage women to come together and share personal experiences so that women might better understand and support one another (Tong, 2009). Two main ideas of this theory are that "the personal is political," which focuses on rebuilding political structures, and that all women are "sisters" (Tong, 2009, p.

56). This concept states that women should be the focus and center of social and political change. Conversely, using a radical libertarian framework, Kate Millett (1970) believes that this idea of sisterhood is problematic because she believes that the sex/gender system is at the "roots of women's oppression" (p. 219). Millet (1970) argues that androgyny is a more desirable goal than masculinity or femininity because it might diffuse patriarchal power. Mistral's poems echo ideas of female connectivity associated with radical cultural feminism, as seen in her poetry about maternity. Mistral's poems suggest that though maternity is expected to take place in the private sphere, that it should be celebrated and recognized, thus pushing it into the public sphere. Moreover, Mistral believed that all women were connected. In essence, the radical cultural feminist idea of woman as center fits with Mistral's works, particularly, Mary Daly's (1978) writings, which theorize women as connected via the concepts of goddess as center.

Radical feminism breaks down into radical cultural feminism and radical libertarian feminism. Mistral's works on motherhood best fit into radical cultural feminism as articulated by Daly (1978).

Daly believed that patriarchy confined and reduced female energy. Daly continues to explain that women have been robbed “of everything: our myths, our energy, our divinity, our Selves” (p. 329). Daly used the goddess image in order to capture the feminine. Mistral, much like Daly, empowers a normally unseen private space of motherhood that has been restricted and removed. In uplifting central images of motherhood, Mistral’s poetry embodies Daly’s ideals of woman as mother as center.

Radical cultural feminism argues for the empowerment of women as mothers while radical libertarian feminists believe that biological motherhood is the one social variable that is in the way of gender equality. Rich (1995) believed that biological motherhood could be empowering, but that it was distorted by patriarchal societies (Tong, 2009). Rich explains this by saying that motherhood in another social context could be very different. Rich believed that motherhood, pregnancy, and birth could have a different meaning in a society that promoted and supported these experiences, meaning that motherhood could be seen as the central space of power that women hold if society functioned under a

radical cultural lens. These theories, particularly the radical cultural lens of Daly’s (1978) goddess imagery, give support to the argument that Mistral’s works are feminist because it gives us a lens to better understand her vision of women as mother.

Mistral is known and critiqued for her poetry about maternity. Mistral felt strongly that maternity was key to a woman living a full life. In fact, she said that women’s sterility was a curse (Arce de Vazquez, 1964). Due to her passionate representations of motherhood, her poems “were represented as a uniquely-fashioned vessel for her all-embracing maternalism” (Miller, 2005, p. 136). Due to this phenomenon, the “mythology of ultimate motherhood became attached to her” (p. 136). Mistral’s poetry was very mother-focused and, thus, she was made into a figure for maternity, but her thought about sterility as a curse is limiting to some women. On the other hand, Mistral’s poetry underlines the importance of maternity and echoes Rich’s (1995) ideas that motherhood could mean something totally different in another society that values women and mothers.

Mistral’s celebration of maternity is visible in her book, *Ternura*, which

contains themes that include “maternal love, its pleasures, [and] enchantments” (Arce de Vazquez, 1964, p. 41). Mistral goes to the extreme of suggesting that the only reason for women’s existence was motherhood, both material and spiritual (Dana, 1971). Mistral says:

Whether she’s a professional, a worker, a peasant, or simply a gentlewoman, a women’s only reason for being is motherhood, both material and spiritual, or the latter alone for those of us who do not have children.

(qtd. in Miller, 2005, p. 141)

These stanzas show that Mistral was not only passionate about maternity, but she envisioned women as mothers in order to be ‘real’ and ‘complete’ women. In the tone of radical libertarian thinking akin to Millet’s (1969) reach for androgyny, I find this idea to be problematic because it puts women into a place where they must attain a certain objective in order to be a significant being. Millet as example would detest the idea of mothers as complete, arguing that women as mother is restricting since not all women are mothers, and since womanhood itself is a much broader space of identity. Conversely, in terms of radical cultural feminism, this quote summarizes the idea that the biological

capacity to reproduce is central to female identity. Additionally, this quote of Mistral’s shows her inclusivity of motherhood. Here, she explains that motherhood does not have to be necessarily biological in order to exist. I believe that this is significant because Mistral is broadening the scope of motherhood by including different types of mothering experiences.

Mistral feared the decrease of physical maternity or fewer women having babies. More specifically, she feared for broad cultural changes in relationship between mother and child (Arce de Vazquez, 1964). Mistral explained that there was an increase in “the refusal of many women to bear children or to be the milking fig tree of stories” (p. 43). This quote exemplifies Mistral’s fear: the decline in bonds between mother and child, meaning, Mistral here represents the relationship between mother and child as the mother acting as a “tree.” Moreover, Mistral believed that mothers formed identity for their children, and thus, maternity was extremely important (Alegria, 1966). Therefore, Mistral also is concerned about the decrease in physical maternity because she fears that children will feel unsettled because they will not have had close bonds with their mothers. (Alegria, 1966). In total,

Mistral was worried about women and their motherhood, and, at the same time, she feared for the children and their mother-connected identities.

Mistral represents maternity as holding a double meaning, both physical and spiritual. Mistral believed that maternity is part of the divine because it is a joyous creation; it attains the eternal because it scoffs at death and spiritualizes the fleeting pleasures of the flesh” (Anderson, 1964, p. 27). This quote explains that maternity does not just fill the role of sexual desires, but also extends the woman’s life because her offspring will be part of her lineage. Therefore, motherhood is also a way of preserving oneself in the future. This directly aligns with Daly’s (1978) construction of women as goddess because it reflects women as more than just physical beings; they are able to transcend physical limits.

This idea of duality is seen in “Mexican Child”:

Two years ago I left
my little Mexican boy,
but awake or asleep
I comb him with my hands.
It is a maternity
That never tires my lap.
It is an ecstasy I live
Freed from great death!

(Mistral, 1924, 65)

Here, you can see the happiness and relief of this mother. She explains that she does not get tired of maternity, and, in fact, it is an “ecstasy” for her. She feels happy here because she is liberated of death; she knows her son lives and, thus, she does not truly die. This poem’s language is simplistic and straightforward, which shows this mother’s contented spirit. It explains that even if she is not present with her son, she is a part of him.

I find Mistral’s treatment of motherhood as everlasting to be the most intriguing theme in her poetry. To me, the idea of self-preservation and self-importance is a clearly feminist element in Mistral’s work. Her poetry represents motherhood itself as an act of self-preservation. Motherhood becomes a liberating experience for women themselves. I think that this empowers all women by changing motherhood from a subordinate role in support of patriarchy into a position of power and liberation in support of women’s nurturing and caring roles. This analysis is consistent with a radical cultural feminist lens, which, as women-centered, elevates women’s role as creators. While radical libertarian feminism would find this definition of

motherhood to be restricting and in the way of women's social and economic equality, the power of women as potential or figurative mothers is the piece of Mistral's work that I find most significant because it structurally situates woman in a position of influence and importance. This is consistent with radical cultural feminist thinking on the female center as knowing and good; motherhood in Mistral becomes an extension of this role.

In addition to portraying mother images, Mistral's poetry reflects her Catholic faith. Mistral as a mother figure liked to associate her poetry with "the divinely powerful voice of the virgin" (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 218). Mistral used the Virgin/Mater Dolorosa figures as a means to attain power and authority in a "male dominated world" (p. 218). The Mater Dolorosa is another way of describing the Virgin and represents the idea of surviving a "painful and divine condition" (p. 218), and "the feminine that has survived in the social order, deprived of its raw energy" (Ryan-Kobler, 1997, p. 327). Mistral uses the Virgin to show the feminine that has survived and to glorify this strength. In essence, Mistral employs the Virgin/Mater Dolorosa "as a way to address female experience and

summon to her side a cultural authority that allowed her to speak as a woman" (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 218). This example is very similar to Daly's (1978) goddess vision, where women are conceived of as sacred. This also shows that Mistral knew that she lived in an androcentric society where she needed to find alternative spaces for power in her poetry. As citizens of a largely Catholic country, Chileans are familiar with and respect the Virgin. Mistral used the Virgin as a figure in her works in order to grab attention and gain respect in her poetry. Mistral was intelligent and deliberate in doing this; she incorporated a well-known woman into her poetry to fulfill her own desires.

Although Mistral's poems never literally reference the Virgin by name, they use allusion and imagery to bring the Virgin to mind. "The Strong Woman," for example, refers to the Virgin through description:

I remember your face that was noticed
in my days
blue-skirted women with a tanned
forehead,
that in my childhood and on my land
of ambrosia
I saw the black groove a burning April.

It rose in the tavern, deep, the impure
cup

a son stuck to your lily breast
and beneath this memory, that you
were burning,
fell the seed of your hand, serene.

(as cited in Bruzelius, 1999, p. 219)

This poem clearly alludes to the Virgin. First, Mistral describes her as a woman in blue clothing, a color that is commonly associated with the Virgin. Moreover, there is an image of a dove-like breast, which is another common reference to the Virgin. Furthermore, here, Mistral tries to connect the image of the Virgin and the countrywoman in order to improve the reputation of these women. This association helps the countrywomen and they “become sacred by the evocation of the Virgin’s attributes” (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 220). These examples help us see how Mistral used the power of the Virgin in order to call attention and respect to the common countrywoman. This idea relates to radical cultural feminism, particularly Daly’s (1978) image of a woman goddess because it uplifts motherhood to a place where it is desired as a key to women’s identity and where the sacred of women as mother becomes synonymous with the Virgin image.

Mistral realized the power that using the Virgin could have in her poetry and decided to personify the

principal elements of the Virgin in a way that could help many women. Bruzelius (1999) explains that

...all women fall into one of two categories -- they either are or are not mothers -- Mistral was able to speak for any kind of woman by identifying her with either Mary’s maternity or her virginity. In both cases, moreover, Mistral is giving speech to the speechless under the aegis of Mary” (p. 221).

Mistral used Mary (the Virgin) to represent virgins and mothers, therefore extending her power in order to empower childless women (Bruzelius, 1999). Here, radical cultural feminist ideals are also seen. In extending Mary’s power, Mistral broadens what motherhood means in order to help women who have not borne children, thus creating a position of figurative motherhood for these particular women to occupy. Furthermore, the introduction to *The Mother’s Poems* explains that that set of poems was written to “redeem unwed mothers in the eyes of a brutal world” (p. 221). These examples show that Mistral was passionate and inclusive to non-traditional women and virgins, or non-mothers. In this way, I believe that Mistral’s hidden progressiveness is most visible because she is being inclusive to

generally unseen women and empowering them. For example, here, Mistral extends the attributes of the Virgin to cover even childless women, thus bringing non-traditional women into the dialogue.

In using the principal qualities of the Virgin, maternity, and virginity, Mistral could represent both types of women in her poetry in a respected position. It is interesting to see how Mistral used her Catholic-saturated culture to represent her audience of women. Additionally, Mistral employs religion to show the connection and support that exist between women and God, similar to the way Daly (1978) envisioned women as goddess and sacred in ways detached from patriarchy. This connection is visible at various points in Mistral's poetry. In "Song of Taurus," the poem ends with an image of God and woman. This image shows how God was supported and cradled by women, which positions women as important.

Little son of God the Father,
asleep in the arms of woman.

(Dana, 1971, p. 52)

In another poem, "Rocking," Mistral describes a woman rocking her son. At the end of the poem one can see the

closeness and support of God and this woman and the spirituality this evokes:

Feeling His hand in the shadow
I rock my son.

(p. 43)

Mistral's use of the Virgin is very strategic. Knowing the culture of Chile, Mistral draws on the cultural capital of the Virgin as imagery to convey her ideas and to gain respect and attention for her work, which in turn, empowered many women. Through her use of the Virgin she is able to uplift all women because all can fit under the scope of Mary. Using Mary is also courageous because it challenges patriarchal ideology by pushing Mary into a place of celebration and recognizes her role in supporting the spirituality of God.

The examination of Mistral has forced me to broaden my lens of what I believe feminism and gender expression can mean. At the beginning of the investigation, I found Mistral restrictive and limiting for women and their roles. Yet, after using the feminist lenses of Daly (1978) and Millett (1969) to analyze her ideas, I found Mistral's poetry actually to be inclusive and accepting towards women. While I believe that Mistral's writing could appear very restrictive for women at

face value, following the thinking of radical cultural feminism's female centered ideology, her poetry actually empowers women as a social group.

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