

Surmounting Masculine Subjugation in the Works of Esmeralda Santiago

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In Esmeralda Santiago's works, whether autobiographical, as in the case of her memoirs, *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *The Turkish Lover*, or novelistic, as in the case of *America's Dream*, there is a pattern of subjugation of a female by the most significant male in her life. In each case, however, the woman manages to break the overpowering psychological hold of the controlling and sometimes abusive man. On this occasion, I propose to expose the progressively more aggressive manner of subjugation inflicted on the mother of the author of the memoir in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, on the autobiographical subject in *The Turkish Lover*, and on the novelistic protagonist in *America's Dream*. Following that, I will examine the process by which each of the women surmounted said masculine subjugation to find self-determination.

The first memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican*, published in 1993, is a *bildungsroman*, "filled with coming-of-age anecdotes and sweet memories of family,"¹ as a review in *The Boston Globe* states of another of Santiago's memoirs, *Almost a Woman*. However, when the reader's gaze shifts away from the youthful autobiographical subject to focus on her mother, she also sees the plight of a woman subjugated by her love of her philandering partner and by the mores of the patriarchal society in which she lives, wherein hegemonic values bestow all the power and control on men and impose an expectation of submission and compliance on females.

The reader is introduced to Santiago's mother, invariably referred to as "Mami," as a woman in her thirties living in a common-law union with the father of all her children, a man known to the reader only as "Papi." He lives with her most of the time, and works to improve the condition of their house to make it more livable, if not completely comfortable, for her.

As the memoir moves forward, it becomes obvious that Papi, true to the Puerto Rican stereotype of the *macho*, is a partying philanderer (WIWPR 24). Because of his womanizing, their relationship becomes more and more strained and heated arguments are frequent: “My parents probably argued before Hector was born. . . . But the year Hector was born their fights grew more frequent and sputtered into our lives like water on a hot skillet” (WIWPR 21). The cause of these disputes is that the affection and desire that make him return to her is insufficient to guarantee an exclusive love and sexual relationship with her. She loves him and would be content with the common-law situation, if he were faithful to her; however, he periodically establishes brief liaisons with other women. Although never admitting the cause of his periods away from the home, his meticulous care to his grooming betrays it. He refuses to discuss his infidelity; and, because he is the man of the house and because in the patriarchal milieu in which they live, she is expected to be loyal to him, she remains with him, even though she is deeply wounded by both the affairs and his insensitivity.

He is not deliberately cruel, but there is an obvious sense of entitlement to affairs outside the primary relationship. He expects her to wash and iron the clothes he will wear when he goes to a tryst with another woman (WIWPR 21). When he leaves to be with other women, he returns as if nothing has happened and expects Mami to continue caring for his needs: “Papi didn’t come home for days. Then one night he appeared, kissed us hello, put on his work clothes, and began hammering on the walls. When he’d finished, he washed his hands and face at the barrel near the back door, sat at the table and waited for Mami to serve him supper” (WIWPR 22). Although Mami is seething inside, she grudgingly accepts his return and does not create a scene: “She banged a plateful of rice and beans in front of him, a fork, a glass of water. He didn’t look at her; she didn’t look at him” (WIWPR 22). After a period of mutual sullenness, the couple makes up,

re-establishes their sexual relationship, and conceives yet another child, until they have a total of seven. The infidelity, the arguments, and the emotional toll they take on the author's mother, eventually erode the strength of her love for Papi, and she begins, perhaps unconsciously, to put spatial and emotional distance between them and, eventually, to find her self-reliance.

The road to surmounting masculine subjugation in this memoir is one that is undertaken in stages. In the early days, Mami makes short term escapes to her parent's home in Santurce where she is comforted by her mother and a portion of her fourteen siblings (WIWPR 37). After her mother moves to New York, Mami moves out of the house she shares with Papi and returns to Santurce, but does not go to the family home; instead, she rents a dilapidated house in one of the town's poorer neighborhoods. This is but the first of a series of rented houses to which she moves her growing brood. Not surprisingly, because of masculine hegemony and feminine dependence, the norms of the island, and their social class, she and her common-law husband reunite after each separation.

Mami's second step toward independence and self-reliance is the establishment of financial independence. Steven M. Morgan states in his book, *Conjugal Terrorism: A Psychological and Community Treatment Model of Wife Abuse*, a study of masculine subjugation of women that: "[p]ower accrues to the person controlling the resources" (Morgan 27), and this is precisely what occurs. Mami obtains resources and power through remunerated employment. When money becomes scarce after a hurricane devastates the area, rather than exercising further frugalities, her usual solution to their poverty, Mami tries to supplement the family income by sewing school uniforms at home; however, "she soon realized that the amount of work she put into them was more than she was paid and abandoned the idea while she thought of something else" (WIWPR 111). Indeed, she does not give up the idea of gainful employment; she does

think of something else. When a bra factory opens nearby and needs people who can sew, she applies for a position there. The reader can see Mami's increased self-confidence and unraveling of the bond between her and her common-law husband: "Papi was not around as much once Mami began to work, and our mornings took on a rhythm that left him out the days he was home" (WIWPR 113).

Feeling economically able to fend for herself and her family, Mami leaves Papi once again and moves her children to yet another house, this time in the town of El Mangle, a house that sits on stilts over the polluted discharge of sewage into the bay (WIWPR 133-34). Eventually Papi located his family and "wooed Mami back" (WIWPR 155). At this juncture, the relationship between Santiago's mother and father is strained to the breaking point: "Mami and Papi's arguments had become unbearable. They screamed at each other, ruptured the night with insults and hate-filled words" (WIWPR 204).

Mami reaches the final stage in surmounting masculine subjugation when, using as an excuse her youngest son Raymond's need of medical attention for a foot that was injured in a bicycle accident and has never healed properly, she leaves Puerto Rico with three of her children and eventually takes all seven of them to live with her in Brooklyn. Although the children believe that their father will soon join them, their mother knows that it is a permanent rupture that she planned and executed in order to separate permanently from the man who depended on her love for him, the opinions of neighbors, and the traditions of Puerto Rico's patriarchal society to keep her at his side, despite his philandering and meager financial support of his family.

In this memoir there is masculine subjugation of Mami that exists, not entirely because the man in her life makes an active attempt to control her behavior or thought, but rather because

it is institutionalized by the environment in which they live. In the other two works that are examined here, there is a more overt and well-defined effort by the masculine figure in the lives of the female protagonists to control them.

In Santiago's 2004 memoir, *The Turkish Lover*, the woman at the center of the narrative is Santiago, herself. Here, the reader sees the progression of her relationship with her lover Ulvi, a Turkish man who had resided in Germany for many years and was in the United States seeking backing for the American release of his prize-winning film. It is a liaison in which subjugation of her by Ulvi is achieved by psychologically controlling her will and her every action. Although Ulvi is the age of the autobiographical subject's mother, she is immediately attracted to him and quickly is enthralled by him. The initial subjugation of her is achieved by Ulvi through a process of infantilization of her and by eroding her sense of self. Refusing to use her given name of Esmeralda, he refers to her as Chiquita, an infantile, double diminutive that denies her true identity and diminishes her sense of personhood. He also infantilizes her by constantly stating that she is ignorant and needs him to teach her everything (TTL 22). There is a combination of paternalism and harshness in his insistence that she needs to learn from him:

“If you want to be with me,” he said, inches from my face, “you must do what I tell.” His nostrils flared, his eyes were hard behind his long, black lashes. His brow stern. I thought for a moment he would hit me, and when his hand moved toward me, I flinched. But he gently reached for my chin, and his features softened. “You have much to learn, Chiquita, I will teach you. But only if you listen.” (TTL 48).

He deems her ignorance to be so great that she may not even have her own opinions: “You are not well informed, Chiquita, Ulvi often told me. ‘You cannot have opinions’” (TTL 132). The

areas of her life that require his teaching cover everything and can be seen as a way of controlling every aspect of her existence. He is, in fact, what M. Elbow labels a “controller,” in a study he did of men in abusive marital relationships: “They could not tolerate their wives’ autonomy, feeling that any deviation from their strict control threatened their well-being” (cited in Morgan 21-22). Ulvi controls what her appearance should be by insisting that she wear her hair long and deciding what kind of clothing she should wear. During a shopping excursion, he devalued every choice she made:

“Not that one, Chiquita,” he said about a linen dress I liked, “it wrinkles too much.” I put it back. “That one is not good color for you,” he complained as I held a green top against my chest. I returned it. “Look how poor is made this one,” he fingered the hem of another dress I’d just pulled from the rack. (TTL 49)

The extreme example of his instruction in how to do things his way is presented in his controlling the rate at which she eats a meal: “The moment between plate and lips had become the most important part of my meals, a few hesitant seconds which he controlled by insisting that I eat at his speed, to get used to the timing. I was to drink when he drank, to eat when he did, to blot my lips, ‘never wipe,’ when his lips were wet” (TTL 26).

A second way in which Santiago is subjugated by Ulvi is through isolation and total dependence on him. First, he isolated her from her family by refusing to visit in their home, then by asking her to move to Texas with him. He both isolates her from her coworkers and makes her dependent on him by walking her to and from work (TTL 52), until they acquire a car using as down payment the \$300 she has left in savings after paying for her vacation with him in the Bahamas and for her move to Texas to be with him (TTL 149).

As can be seen from the situation above, he also subjugates her financially. First, he causes her to deplete her savings by asking her to travel for his sake. Then he has her leave her well-paid job to join him in another state. Finally, he takes complete control of her money:

When I received my first paycheck, he said he would cash it for me. I signed it over and the next day he handed me a few dollars and kept the rest.

“You like to spend, Chiquita,” he said. “I save for you. Is better, so you will not be tempted. But if you need something, ask.” (TTL 52-53)

The process by which Esmeralda surmounts Ulvi’s very effective masculine subjugation is slow and her hesitation may become irritating to the reader at times. Four different times she leaves him only to be lured back by promises of a long life together, notwithstanding that he has told her clearly and repeatedly that he cannot, will not ever marry her. Despite those statements, he keeps her hopes alive by referring to their vacations as “honeymoons”: “‘A honeymoon,’ he’d teased, and I’d been happy because the word sounded like a promise” (TTL 31).

The straw that breaks the camel’s back and finally motivates her to surmount his subjugation comes on the evening of her graduation from Harvard, when she receives a long-distance telephone call from a former professor who wants to congratulate her. When she hangs up, Ulvi asks who it was, and she tells him. He wants to know if the professor is a man and when she confirms it, he accuses her, as he has often done in the past, by asking if he was a lover. She has let similar accusations go unchallenged in the past because he usually gets over his jealousy in a short time, but this time she cannot do it, because she will not accept that he cannot rejoice in her friend’s well-deserved congratulations (TTL 327). After this affront, she moves out of their apartment and makes the rupture permanent.

The subjugation of the women in these two memoirs is absolutely not a desirable state. In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, as we saw, there is no indication that Santiago's father ever used physical violence against her mother. In *The Turkish Lover*, there are a couple of instances in which Ulvi slaps Esmeralda in the face (TTL 158, 187), but there is no escalation of violence beyond that. In her novel, *America's Dream*, however, Santiago presents a protagonist that is a classic case of the battered woman. The reader sees working in this novel M. Elbow's theory that "violence is defined as a political act designed to deny the victims this [*sic*] personal and civil rights by violating this [*sic*] personal and psychological space. Violence is used to maintain the position of power one individual has over the other" (cited in Morgan 27).

The protagonist in *America's Dream* is a woman in her late twenties who, at age 14, had been seduced by a man referred to in the novel as Correa and ran away with him. He was a man who had come to the community with the contractors who were improving the island (AD 25). He never married her, and eight months later she returned to her mother's home, pregnant with his child. América's situation, *vis a vis* Correa, as the novel begins is as follows:

He lives on the other side of the island, has other women, has, in fact, a legal wife and kids in Fajardo. But he always comes back to América, under the pretext of seeing his daughter. And when he does, he stays in her bed. And if any other man dares get too friendly, he beats her up. In the fifteen years Correa has been in her life, no other men have dared enter it, for fear he will kill her. (AD 25)

Although he visits his daughter Rosalinda and supplies a few frivolous gifts on occasion, he does not provide for her in any meaningful way:

He's never contributed much toward Rosalinda's support He gives Rosalinda spending money every so often but that's it. América has paid for everything else.

. . . Correa claims Rosalinda is his favorite child, the first child he ever fathered. . .
. . . But he's never taken responsibility for her upbringing, has left the parenting up to America. (AD 54-55)

Correa's manner of effecting masculine subjugation over América is entirely through violence. The first instance of it is recounted within the first five pages of the novel, when América has gone to his place of employment to inform him that their fourteen-year-old daughter has repeated the cycle and run off with a boy. She wants to go with him in his Jeep to look for her, but he violently refuses to let her: "His slap sends her sprawling onto the gravel of the road" (AD 14) and he speeds off by himself. Later, when she goes to the boy's home and gets into a physical altercation with his mother, another facet of Correa's fascination with violence is revealed. He arrives and roughly pulls her away: "He squeezes his arm tight around her throat, until she can hardly breathe, and leans his whole weight against her. The struggle has excited him, and América feels his erection pressing against her buttocks" (AD 20). This combination of violence and sexuality is repeated when, disregarding the sleeping children she is babysitting in the hotel where she works, he drunkenly rapes her in a very violent manner that includes biting her all over her body (AD 107-109).

Correa fits two of the four profiles of battering men proposed by M. Faulk, the dependent-suspicious men who "have 'long histories of overt suspicion of their wives' fidelity, but with a strong need to stay in the relationship. Tension built up over time and was reduced by violence'" (cited in Morgan 20), and the violent-bully, who used "violence and intimidation to get what they wanted. Alcohol abuse was often associated with their violence" (cited in Morgan 21). Correa is suspicious of every man who looks at América. Once, after a night in the clubs and dance halls, they meet Odilio Pagán, currently a police officer, but a former beau from the time

before América met Correa: “[A]s soon as Pagán turns the corner, Correa makes América face him” (AD 73) and forbids her to let Pagán come to the house again, which he has done in connection with the investigation of Rosalinda’s running away. América tries to defend herself, “forgetting for an instant that Correa doesn’t like her to talk back. She feels the slap before she sees his hand, has barely enough time to realize she’s let down her guard before another slap crosses her face from the opposite direction” (AD 75).

The full magnitude of his violence toward her emerges when he decides that their daughter will stay with his relatives in Fajardo, and América resists the plan. He slaps her several times, punches her in the stomach, and kicks her with both feet when she falls to the floor (AD 85). When América refuses his help to get up, “[h]e pins her down on the floor and hits her, picks up her head by the hair, slams it against the tiles. . . . [his] growls are savage, animallike, and finally, she goes unconscious” (AD 86).

P. Wilkinson says in a study published in a 1974 that the phase after the eruption of violence “is marked by the husband’s feelings of guilt and shame, where he attempts reconciliation. . . . his attempts at reconciliation are often overdone” (cited in Morgan 36). This is very much what happens after Correa’s vicious attack:

On Sunday Correa appears carrying a box of Fannie Farmer chocolates and a cordless telephone. After every beating, he shows up a few days later with a gift in place of an apology. The size and expense of the gift is usually in proportion to the severity of the beating. Electronics typically mean he knows he’s really hurt her, but chocolates always mean she deserved it. (AD 90-91)

It takes this horrific level of aggression to make América take the step that will help her surmount her subjugation to Correa through violence. She agrees to leave Puerto Rico to work as

a nanny for the tourist couple from Connecticut for whom she had babysat while they vacationed at the hotel where she works. She leaves the island, without telling Correa, knowing that he will prevent her from leaving if he finds out. However, by beguiling their daughter into revealing América's whereabouts, he finds the house in New England where she is employed, goes there, and breaks in. As she's on the phone calling 911, he enters her room, grabs the phone, and hangs it up. He attacks her with a knife and wounds her shoulder (AD 316-317). Her visceral fear translates into strength and she "pushes against Correa with all her strength, is as surprised as he is when he stumbles back and drops the knife" (AD 317). She runs from the room screaming, in fear for not only her life but for those of the children in her charge. When he catches up to her at the front door he stabs her in the back and,

comes around to face her, and she can't recognize him. . . . There's no love there. It's hate that she sees, hate that she feels as she uses her last bit of strength to kick him hard in the one place she knows she can hurt him, between his hairy legs. He doubles over with a groan, and she kicks him again, connects against his lowered face this time, and he turns and falls. There's a crack, like a twig breaking, as Correa's head bounces against the angled edge of the granite coffee table. (AD 318)

Although not planned, this is the final and definitive step needed for her to be free from his subjugation and the control and violence he has heaped on her for over fifteen years.

There is no question that the female protagonist of *América's Dream* is a battered woman by any definition we can find of that term. Although, as Steven M. Morgan tells us, "battered women appear to fall into the syndrome of 'learned helplessness.' . . . [after they] have been

physically and psychologically terrorized into submission, intimidated by their past experiences” (Morgan 14), América manages to overcome that state.

The women in *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *The Turkish Lover* are not physically battered, but it can still be said that they are battered women. In the case of *The Turkish Lover*, the battering is of a psychological rather than physical nature, and as effective in holding Esmeralda in thrall to Ulvi as physical violence might be. The author’s mother in *When I Was Puerto Rican* is subjugated by the patriarchal milieu in which she lived. In all three instances, despite masculine hegemony and power, the women are able to overcome their “learned helplessness” after prolonged suppression, and find the strength to surmount the masculine subjugation inflicted upon them. Their efforts are not effective immediately; but, eventually, all three are able to liberate themselves and, for the first time in their lives, find self-determination.

Notes

¹ These remarks are taken from the collection of critical quotations from various sources found in the front of the memoir *Almost a Woman*.

Works Cited

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