

## THE AGUARUNA GIRL. THE CHARACTER BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM IN MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S THE GREEN HOUSE

### AGUARUNA. PERSONAJUL ÎNTRE CIVILIZAȚIE ȘI BARBARISM ÎN ROMANUL LUI MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, CASA VERDE

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#### Abstract

*Through his novels, especially through Green House, the writer Mario Vargas Llosa highlights the tares of the Peruvian society and its pseudo-civilization. Comparing the city to the selva, the latter is virtuously superior, as true acts of kindness and humanity are being created in the selva. Standing out of the narrative mosaic, Bonifacia, an Aguaruna christened by nuns, abides the drama of an alienated, humiliated, abused woman in the context of the Peruvian machismo. Her life is a symbolic outline of the selva destiny in contact with civilization.*

#### Rezumat

*Prin intermediul romanelor sale, cu precădere prin „Casa verde”, scriitorul Mario Vargas Llosa evidențiază tarele societății peruviene și pseudo-civilizația acesteia. Comparând orașul cu selva, ultima se dovedește a fi superioară din punct de vedere moral, de vreme ce adevăratele acte de bunătate și umanitate se nasc în selvă. Ieșită în relief din mozaicul narativ, Bonifacia, o aguarună încreștinată de maici trăiește drama femeii dezrădăcinate, meprizate și abuzate în contextul machismului peruan. Viața ei este un rezumat simbolic al destinului selvei în contact cu civilizația.*

**Key words:** *Aguaruna, identity, otherness, alienated, machismo, abuse*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *aguarună, identitate, celălalt, dezrădăcinat, machism, abuz*

#### Introduction

In his speech of acceptance of the Rómulo Gallegos prize (1967) for his novel *The Green House*, Llosa vehemently denounces the abuses committed by the authorities in the Amazonian area and the confinement of the indigenous in some of the regions. The Peruvian writer impetuously advocates for freedom, mainly freedom of speech. (DE CASTRO, BIRNS, 2010, 178, 179) The Amazonian area is exposed at large prevalently in three of his novels: *La casa verde* (*The Green House*), 1966, *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (*Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*), 1973 and *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*), 1987. They singularize the function of the teller in today's society and reveal the grievance of the indigenous and of the marginalized social categories in a world dominated by machismo and violence, a world morally depraved, corrupt and greedy for power, where each Peruvian asserts in his small social, ethnic, racial and economic fraction, disdaining the inferior and vitiating the superior one. In *The Green House* Vargas Llosa exploits his own experience in the novelistic canvas: his childhood in Piura, his memories about the brothel on the skirts of the town, the trip in the Amazonian selva and the geographical research regarding this amazing natural area. (LLOSA, 1995, 28, 182, 465) In 1957 Vargas Llosa visits the selva with a

group of anthropologists of San Marcos University and discovers heterogeneous facets of the Indian world, hears stories about autochthon rubber interlopers, about a Japanese with many wives and about a tribe chief, Jum, who has been tortured because he antagonized the white's exploitation. In this train of events, the writer visits a local Catholic mission and discovers that the indigenous girls are civilized and then they become maids or prostitutes. Hoarding up these ingredients of reality, the writer generates a disguise for the truth – as he confesses – in a process similar to an inverted striptease. (SMITH, 1997, 831)

### **An exhibit of civilization and barbarism**

Structurally, *The Green House* is a narrative geography, like the river Amazon, a fusion of actions, destinies, sounds and colours. The novel represents a daring project in an epoch of literary prolificacy in Latin-American context. Structured in four parts and an epilogue, the novel interlaces – in a modern style – three stories: one of Bonifacia, the Aguaruna girl kidnapped by Reategui and made a nun, who ends up being the green house prostitute, one of Anselmo, the founder of the green house brothel, and one of Fushia, a rubber trafficker. Characters from the urban context are captured in an Amazonian context and indigenous characters are placed in an urban framework, in Piura. Thus, we uncover the destinies of three generations and three idylls: Lituma–Bonifacia, Fushia–Lalita and Anselmo–Antonia, three locations, the selva, Santa Maria de Nieva and Piura, and distinguish two incongruous worlds – the jungle and the city. The narrative structure is fractured, dislocated with an isochronous perspective and a telescopic dialogue, projected on a multiple chronotope. (KÖLLMANN, 2014, 105, 107)

Beyond words, Vargas Llosa features in a salient way his native country, a territory marked with violence on every level, “there is an essential ingredient, always present in the history of this country, from the most remote times: violence. Violence of all kinds: moral, physical, fanatical, intransigent, ideological, corrupt, stupid – all of which have gone hand in hand with power here.” (LLOSA, 1986, 109) The outlook on life is a dark one, hopeless and cold, where the individual is determined by ungovernable actions and circumstances.

The heroine, Bonifacia, is taken from the jungle, uprooted in order to be civilized. Her road to civilization will never include an absolute acceptance of who she is and of where she is from. In the Self – Other nexus she will never find a true Self. Reaching the convent the girl learns to identify with the nuns by peculiarities. She conforms herself to desistance. She concedes the fight of being an Aguaruna. The writer undermines the myth of freedom here in the light of an identity-alterity ratio. Nothing is able to change society of its ethical perversion. The entire existence is depraved and characters are nothing but stranded destinies.

In his novel Vargas Llosa renders all defining aspects of the Amazonian tribe's culture: customs, superstitions, beliefs and occupations. For Indians jungle is simultaneously home, nourishment, pantheon and pharmacy. The natives embrace the jungle on every level in order to survive. For the white people jungle is an allurement and a profit. Whites as Reategui or Fushia pay a small price for the rubber but market it for a high one making a small fortune. The cruel and malicious Japanese makes use of the Huambisa tribe's truculence to despoil the Indians of their possessions and sells rubber during war time for a profit. Nevertheless, the jungle has a magical influence on its sojourners fathering a quasi-mentality. But the white-Indian connection is built upon conveniences, the rubber and animal skin trade, and defined by misfeasance and objectification.

### **An inexorable destiny**

The abuse and objectification are aggravated in female occurrences. Women are portrayed mainly as sexual objects. Aquilino articulates this aspect when recollecting his childhood, “When I was a boy, in Moyombamba, we used to go in groups to spy on the Lamista women” and “Sometimes one of them would go off by herself and we'd pull her down”. (LLOSA, 1968, 160) Their destiny is a relentless one. As individuals they represent the Other in an androcentric context,

a subservient rival to the man, to the superior.<sup>1</sup> The pickets sent to find the convent's fugitives lament about not having permission to rape them. Fushia sells Lalita (15 years old) to Reategui for a thousand soles. The girls kidnapped from the jungle by the governor are assaulted by his soldiers with Reategui's approval, while he is cossetting the girl with green eyes, further named Bonifacia. On the jungle-city passage and in the barbarism-civilization and men-women ratio, women enter a *katáhrisis* array without any ability of redemption. They are insulated in a man domineering world and approached as an object of an impulsive desire. Nuns try to settle them into a transfiguration process but involuntarily and maybe subconsciously they assure them only an entrance towards a perverted system. Their evolution is thus a distorted one. In the end they metamorphose into a sort of deficient indigenous Galatea, rotting their true identity in the process. Not entirely civilized or primitive, they oscillate between the selva and the city, between Self and Other on a labyrinthine road from the past to the future.

Bonifacia, an emblematic name for a metamorphosed Indian, finishes as a strumpet. The girl represents a desideratum for the Invincibles, a sexual gratification. Ironically, the Invincibles, civilized men from Piura in comparison with the Indians such as Bonifacia or Anselmo, are nothing but impudent fribbles, as stipulated in their canticle. (LLOSA, 1968, 207, 231) They are morally degraded and their abuse as a form of domination mirrors emasculation and abasement. Their machismo is an instance that emphasizes a binary formation – civilization and barbarism. But here we identify an inverted nexus. In the Amazonian jungle, a barbaric setting, violence is a form of survival while in the urban area it reflects an internal combustion of the individual in the modern society as it is an act of recollecting a lost identity (masculinity). Indians retrieve their humanity through acts of love. Whites mime civilization concealing their barbaric animus and their dehumanized *modus vivendi*. Lituma batters Bonifacia, Josefino seduces and then pimps her in the green house, mystifying her Self, converting her into his own image of an Aguaruna – an object, a barbarous female, less human, less feminine, less motherly. However, the true barbarous one is him, the white man. The whites conduct themselves as animals while Indians, besides their indigenous origin, reverberate humanness: Indian women are the only people that take care of the leprous Fushia, the Huambisas are cruel with their enemy but shelter the fugitive Fushia and Lalita and help them with the isle deforestation. Above the green-yellow chromatic iconology, the symbol of fire connotes an act of purging. Fire purifies the island and redeems the city of the ignominious brothel.

### **An indigenous Galatea**

A true heroine in consequence of her actions led by love, thus by humanity, Bonifacia is an Indian, seized from the jungle as a child by Reategui, the governor of Santa Maria de Nieva, concomitantly with her (implicit) father's calamitous capture. Her green eyes are a trademark that will make her recognizable alongside the narration. (LLOSA, 1968, 106, 194, 287) She is an Aguaruna, an endogamous tribe, with an apu or a kakájam as a leader, like Huambisa and Shapra.<sup>2</sup> The Aguaruna tribe is formed by law-abiding Indians while Huambisa is a worthy enemy due to its cruelty. A true representation of her given name, the girl is a benefactor revealing empathy, abnegation and love, working hard, being concerned about her abbess, helping the entrant girls. She appears to be a barbaric version of Eliza or Galatea, compliant to the others' attempt to civilize her. But her progression intended and propped by the nuns is retrogressive in reality. Civilization degrades her identity and her morality so far as to convert her into a catspaw. The process of her becoming resolves into a collection of pieces, a distorted assembly of a pseudo-Galatea. Experiencing the uprooted misfortune and in the search for an Other like herself, she identifies with the newcomers because she understands their affliction, she recaptures fractions of hers through them. That is the reason why she frees the new girls. While she is trapped in a damned present, an inexorable destiny, she tries to ensure them an unchained future. She understands the disease of the

<sup>1</sup> In her book, *Our Androcentric Culture, or the Man Made World*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains the social fixation on masculinity as androcentrism on <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3015/3015-h/3015-h.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.everyculture.com/South-America/Aguaruna.html>

civilized men, the white man's savagery and his disdain towards Indians. As a castigation, she is kicked out of the convent and becomes Lalita's maid. Her attempts to identify an Other in order to find herself become a true rabbit hole. In the urban area, world is seen like a fractured mirror, in which an individual is able to identify elements but never a whole, an entity. Induced by her lady, Bonifacia marries Lituma thus embracing a certain respected status. This represents a final step towards her civilized identity through the unifying process with her Other. For the wedding she manufactures a yellow dress, a resemblance of her father's eyes when captured. Her languish for acceptance and integration is unfolded through this subscript. But Lituma, the Other, is a racist, resentful of her ethnos. He reflects the Other as a rival. He forces her to wear shoes in an attempt to mystify her poor origin. Bonifacia is subdued by him through abuse and abjection, atoning for her error of mistaking love for desire. In the city her relentless destiny will be a Sisyphean trial in order to find herself through fragments of identity. In a male dominated society she has to simultaneously confront the gender and the ethnic discrimination.

Indians are ostracized and treated like animals, albeit the animal metaphors are dedicated to the whites – when Josefino seduces Bonifacia he is called the worm man, a reference to the serpent that allured Eve in the garden. (LLOSA, 1968, 307) The Christened indigenous have a pseudo-freedom and two options: to become a servant or a white's slave. The Japanese establishes their status when telling Aquilino: "squaws, Aquilino, Aguarunas, Achuals, Shapras, real dirt, man." (LLOSA, 1968, 140) But the white's attempt to remodel Bonifacia as a civilized woman is a subversive form of covering a mirrored Self and of deconstructing a civilization-barbarism nexus. While the woman may be primitive in her origin and semblance she is morally superior to the white man, a barbaric and primitive individual in his essence, a tainted soul in a civilized image.

Bonifacia concedes on her last level of abasement when Aquilino facilitates her abortion. After that, she becomes a prostitute, thus an object, as she was always perceived. In her pursuit for affiliation, the Aguaruna girl conventionally attaches herself on Anselmo, the harper, based on their common origin, their social descent, "I loved the harp player" and "I was closer to him than you; didn't he come from the same part of the country...?" (LLOSA, 1968, 402) For that matter both characters are asserted through the novel in light notations. Bonifacia's eyes radiate in the same manner as Anselmo's green house and harp. Both relate to their beginning via Amazon's primary color – green. Through him Bonifacia finds an Other that is part of the Self, a piece of identity and not another dominant rival. In spite of the context, Bonifacia dedicates herself to the one man that takes care of her while Anselmo applies himself to Antonia. Their reprehensible acts are redeemed from barbarism and impurity through love.

The city-selva contrast is directly distinguished by the novel's characters and, in reverse, through the storyline's behind-thought. When Lituma induces her to follow him, he notices that Piura is "a city with buildings, cars and movies" while the village Santa Maria de Nieva is miserable, "with naked savages, mosquitoes, and rain that rots everything, starting with the people." (LLOSA, 1968, 305) But putrescibility follows an inverted direction, from the city, from civilization outward. Emblematically, the scene from the novel's first fragment explains the process of putrefaction – on the road to Urakusa captain Quiroga's legs are full running sores. He keeps them in the water and keeps scratching them with some branches. Therefore, his wounds are creating a whitish trail in the water. It determines Nieves to remark the absence of the fish: "they could smell it, if they sucked on those legs they'd die of poison." (LLOSA, 1968, 69) Arriving in Urakusa, they find no Aguaruna. Like fishes, Indians absconded from whites in order to escape putrescence. The merits of the jungle are remarkable. Men are touched by evil everywhere, despite their root, but the selva ascends morally above the city. Currently, in the Amazonian jungle there are approximately one hundred tribes living in isolation.<sup>3</sup> The seclusion of the indigenous is due to white men and their avarice. All the activities of the whites actuated more and more resentment and isolation. Indians are afraid of the disease called civilization. Symbolically, in his decline Fushia

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<sup>3</sup> <http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2011/04/01/uncontacted-tribes-the-last-free-people-on-earth/>

becomes a leper, not only morally but also physically. Everyone avoids him because of his fetor. His words regarding 'the smell of life' appear to be an auctorial advice – underlining the malady of the Peruvian society. (LLOSA, 1968, 366) Father Garcia concludes in an apocalyptic manner: nowadays devil is 'everywhere'. (LLOSA, 1968, 393)

### Conclusion

Violence, defined as a social disease by the Peruvian writer, is induced by ethnic discrimination, impoverishment, contamination and corruption. The individual's destiny as the Aguaruna's is inextricably intertwined with the country's fatality. Thus the malefactor becomes the society itself with its depraved establishment, while characters like Fushia or Reategui are only its exponents. In this regard, the novel serves as an act of revolt against the corrupt society, a means of protesting and a social reaction in a Sartre-like manner.

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