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Carmen de Icaza: Novela Rosa as Feminist Discourse?

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Carmen de Icaza (1899-1979) is perhaps one of the best-known writers of *novelas rosas* (romance novels) from the early to mid-part of the 20th century in Spain. In 1945, the Gremio de Libreros declared Icaza as "most read author".[1] Over time, however, Icaza has been overlooked by scholars because of the popularity of her novels, because of their tag as romance novels, and because of her fascist leanings. I suggest that in Cristina Guzmán, profesora de idiomas, which was first published in 1936 and is by far the most popular of her novels, Icaza works within the constraints of her fascist beliefs to create a work that espouses early feminist thought while still following the structure of the Spanish romance novel. The importance of this work lies not only in the representation of changing women's roles during Spain's Civil War but also in Icaza's influence on later Spanish women writers.

In order to understand the early feminist and fascist perspectives of the novel, we must understand both the place of the romance genre in literature and Spain's early feminism during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). It would be difficult to give an essential transhistoric definition of feminism; feminism is a category of thinking, writing, and social practice that is contingent upon the social framework in which it exists. American and Spanish feminist categories of the 1930s, or modern feminist categories, suffer when applied to the study of texts written within Fascist Spain. That said, however, it is important to understand the some of the possible meanings of feminism as it applies to the novel and as it was viewed in this era of Spain.

Aurora Morcillo Gómez notes that in the 1930s, Spanish feminism centered on issues of difference. This emphasis was based on pseudo-scientific differences between men and women, some furthered by Freud, such as women being passive and masochistic (Morcillo Gómez 59). A Spanish sociologist of the 1930s, Gregorio Marañón, suggests that moral and intellectual qualities are inherently masculine, while women are purely carnal (Morcillo Gómez 59). He claims that women are not inferior, just different and that the destiny of all women is to become mothers (Morcillo Gómez 59). As Morcillo Gómez explains, there was a "paternalistic posture" by Spanish intellectuals that feminism would be "imposed" on women "without their having to ask for it, called for by men" (58). These details show that "el movimiento feminista español de los años treinta no puede ser considerado como revolucionario, sino que entra dentro del discurso igualitario de raíz burguesa . . . [y] no contó ni con un respaldo masivo ni un activismo militante de la mayoría de las mujer españolas" (Morcillo Gómez 60-61).

The Spanish Civil War was raging in Spain during the time of the writing of Cristina Guzmán, with the fascist side beginning to impose its will on the population. María del Pilar Oñate, whose book on feminism in Spanish literature was also published during the Civil War, gives some insight into the role of women during this time. She tells us, echoing Morcillo Gómez, that according to scientists and psychologists of the 1930s, a woman's principal objective in her life is motherhood (241). This being the case, women should only strive for matrimony, home, and the raising and educating of her children (241). She goes on to quote another critic who discusses feminism, saying that feminists should by all means strive for their maximum desires as long as women do not sacrifice their "exquisita y sutil" feminine attributes in the process (242). She goes on

to praise the amount of effort that men "el sexo fuerte" (248) have put into the feminist movement in Spain, ending her book with the statement, "El hombre y la mujer no nacieron para combatirse, sino para laborar juntos en amistoso amor en la tarea infinita de mejorar la vida de la Humanidad" (248). Morcillo Gómez comments on the relationship between the feminist movement in Spain and the issues that caused the Civil War: "El feminismo español. . . se vio envuelto en el conflicto ideológico entre la izquierda y la derecha y fracasó como movimiento específico" (58).[2]

At this same time, during the Civil War, the Falange Española Tradicionalista—the fascists—wanted their women to be submissive and self-sacrificial, women who would follow the rules of the new regime (Morcillo Gómez 73). These ideals caused the creation of the "Sección Femenina", an organization whose purpose was to teach women the tenets of self-sacrifice and submissiveness of the Falange. By 1936, the organization had over 80,000 female members (Gallego Méndez 46).[3] As is the case during wartime for any country, these women had to work; however, unlike the United States of America and the United Kingdom where women's roles expanded to industry and defense, Spanish women's jobs tended to be the "typical" women's jobs—they repaired and cleaned uniforms, worked as nurses, and took care of children (Morcillo Gómez 81).

Icaza presents these aspects of life in Cristina Guzmán; she also shows her awareness of the impact of the novel during its time through her comments in the introduction to the 1939 version of this novel. She says:

> Y es que el Madrid rojo, en patética paradoja, pedía novelas rosas. Relatos llenos de optimismo fácil, en las que la virtud triunfa siempre y es

> castigada la maldad. El Madrid de la pesadilla pedía ensueño. El Madrid del odio pedía amor. (iii)[4]

Icaza states that through Carmen Primo de Rivera, she found out that her novel was passed around in the prison in Alicante (iii).[5] She also speaks to one of the themes of the novel, which is "Dar, dar y dar" (iv). Suggesting her closeness to fascist's positions on women, she expands on this, saying, "Como el de todas las mujeres españolas, que en esta hora dura y profunda, sin grandes gestos ni grandes palabras, han sabido dar a la Patria lo mejor que tenían: ¡sus hijos! Y que con naturalidad suprema siempre se encuentran allí donde hacen falta" (iv). These statements relate exactly to the eighteen basic tenets of the ideal for the Falangist woman. Number nine states: "Act happily and without hesitation" and number 18 insists: "No other glory is comparable to the glory of having given everything for the Country" (Morcillo Gómez 82). We can see Icaza's commitment to her falangist beliefs in her statements about her works, but what about the novel itself? Does it, too, espouse only fascist beliefs?

In order to answer these questions, we must first analyze the genre itself. The romance novel has never been readily seen as an outlet for feminist discourse. In the article "The Romance Novel, or, the Generalísimo's control of the popular imagination", the authors state that Franco used the romance novel as a way of exposing Spaniards to his wanted social structure (47). Janice Radway, in her 1984 book analyzing American women's popular fiction, suggests that the purpose of a romance novel is to reinforce a traditional heterosexual relationship that can create a fully satisfied female subjectivity (14). She goes on to question the effect these books have on their women readers:

> Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality merely stitch the reader ever more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Or, alternatively, does the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses. . . lead to a new sense of strength and independence? (15)

These questions become difficult to answer due to the societal differences of where the books are written, where/when they are read, and how much opposition comes from women's choice to read them.[6] Spain in the 1930s had a small number of literate women, and romance novels were one of the only options available to them.[7] Therefore, the *novela rosa* served as a popular vehicle for women's concerns.

To understand the importance and the format of the *novela rosa,* I look to Andrés Amorós, who in 1968 published a short book entitled Sociología de una novela rosa. Even though this study was published thirty years after Cristina Guzmán and investigates the popularity of a contemporary Spanish romance novelist, it still serves as an important source for understanding the overall structure of a romance novel. Amorós speaks of the necessity of critically evaluating "la cultura de las masas" (10), even if we consider it "ínfimo" and "de mal gusto" (10). He suggests that the following are necessary components of a romance novel: one of the characters must have money; she must be perfect—innocent and beautiful; there must be detailed descriptions of the surroundings (much like the novela decimonónica); the language used must be a little different from popular language; there must be a patriotic element; and, of course, there must be a happy ending; all of which we see in this novel.

Fitting the genre conventions examined by Amorós, Cristina Guzmán, profesora de idiomas tells the tale of a young mother who earns a living by teaching languages. From the outset, we know that Cristina, although living in a modest apartment, must come from money because the furnishings of her home are elegant antiques and the descriptions of her insist that her clothing, though simple, is well-cut and well-chosen. An American millionaire, the appropriately named Gary Prynce-Valmore, asks Cris to fill in for his missing daughter-in-law due to their uncanny resemblance. His son, Joe, is deathly ill and asks for nothing more than his wife, Fifí, who turns out to be Cris's long-lost sister. While nursing Joe back to health, Cris falls in love with Gary, and Cris reveals to him that she is actually the duchess of Monterreal—his social equal and not just "una maestrita". After Joe's death, the two decide to marry, and Cris is rewarded for her years of self-sacrifice and poverty by her advantageous connection.

Throughout the story, Cristina deals with her concerns both about money and about her son with a smile. Her slogan for herself is, "La vida sonríe a quien le sonríe", which she repeats throughout the novel. She states that the key to happiness is in conformity and adaptation, "No resignación, que suena a fracaso y tristeza. Sino conformidad alegre. Optimista" (90). When she feels down, she repeats to herself her slogan, and then tells herself "Frente alta, Cristina Guzmán" (125).

Considering the conventional ending to the story, the question as to how we can regard this novel as advocating an early form of feminism becomes more interesting when looking at Cristina's position as a self-supporting woman. That Cris has a profession certainly lends itself to support feminism, since what woman in the workforce does not believe that she is equal to her male counterparts? Her choice of profession, that

of a language teacher, falls into the category of traditionally acceptable positions for women. Alicia Andreu, in her article on Cristina Guzmán, points out that Cris refers to her work as language teacher negatively: "¡Y no tener que enseñar a conjugar **to ring rang rung** a los mocosos del barrio!" (46); I suggest that this negative attitude towards her job stems mostly from the job's inability to support her family comfortably. However, she excels at her job nursing Joe, highlighting another of the accepted professions for women, especially in a time of war.

Andreu suggests that this novel was used as nationalistic propaganda, promoting the Falange's ideas of nationalism and self-sacrifice for the greater good. She emphasizes that Cristina's role as nurse to Joe supports the Sección Femenina's principal mission of providing nurses for the nationalist hospitals during and after the Civil War. Once again, we must be aware of the situation in which the novel was both written and read; the country was at war, and women needed a mental escape, and a woman who supported herself and her child with a happy heart could serve two purposes—that of the regime (women as mothers) and that of an early feminist stance (women at work).

The entrance of women into the public sphere of the workforce brings to mind the statements of Jo Labanyi in her article, "Resemanticizing Feminine Surrender: Cross-Gender Identification in the Writings of Spanish Female Fascist Activists" (2002). Labanyi argues that some women became fascist activists because of the empowerment that it gave them (76). She describes the process of becoming part of the public space, leaving the sphere of domesticity to become involved in the world of politics, presenting the example of Pilar Primo de Rivera, who proclaimed herself "anti-feminist" while arguing for women's right to work (79). According to Labanyi, Pilar Primo de Rivera

"insists that women's entry into the public sphere is a heroic sacrifice of their domesticity" (79), an ambiguous phrase that both praises women's movement into the workplace while praising the work that women do at home. We see this ambiguity, too, in Cristina's firm belief that women should be allowed to work in order to support themselves and her desire to be able to stay home with her child.

In one conversation in the novel, Cristina confronts a man who challenges her when she talks about woman's need to work. When he looks at her strangely, she says:

—¿Por qué me mira usted con esa cara tan rara? ¿No es usted feminista?

And he replies:

—No, señora, o señorita, no lo soy. Al contrario. Me parece el feminismo algo contra la ley natural de las cosas de este mundo. (65)

When asked to explain himself, he argues that if there were no way for women to earn a living, they would happily stay home, "en espera de poder hacer por las buenas la felicidad de cualquier individuo" (66). He believes that because of feminism, women jump into a life full of conflicts, obstacles and temptations that does not belong to them (66). Cris jumps to the defense of feminism, saying:

> —¡Y usted se las da de hombre moderno! ¡Si tiene usted una mentalidad medieval! ¿De modo que a usted le parecían más "dignas y respetables" . . . aquellas muchachas cuyo único fin en la vida era "atrapar un marido". . .? ¡Y por lo visto, juzga usted lo contrario de dignas y respetables a las chicas de hoy, que ya no quieren ser carga, sino ayuda y sustento de los suyos! ¡Y que no quieren ver en el matrimonio una solución material! Las mujeres modernas, créame usted, no han abandonado sus casas por

> seguir una moda. Y a mí me parecen admirables en este su nuevo anhelo de crearse a pulso un **modus vivendi** que les permita emanciparse de esa ley secular y absurda que decreta que una mujer sólo puede existir mantenida por un hombre . . . (66-67)

He replies to Cris that she is too young and too beautiful to be worried about these things (68). His argument refers back to Oñate's discussion of the traditional thought processes in the 1930s in Spain—that women's biological place is at home raising children. According to Juana Cobo in her article "Working Class Women in the 1931-39 Spanish Republic" women were forced to take less skilled jobs than men; she also talks about the difficulty that women had in working due to lack of childcare and preschools, especially for children of workers and peasants. Cris, however, does not fit into the typical working woman category.

Only a few pages after this passionate speech in support of women's right to economic independence, Cris states that she is not a feminist, "¡No; ella no era feminista! Naturalmente que había que poner a la mujer en condiciones de que supiera ganarse el pan nuestro de cada día; pero de ahí a poetizar el asunto, ¡no y mil veces no!" (73). This statement, though, does not negate the insistence with which Cris argued for women's rights. However much she would like to believe that feminism is unnecessary, her understanding of the financial situation of the typical woman and her disparaging remarks about the women who marry for money show that this character does believe in allowing professional opportunities for women.

The main contradiction that the novel presents is that Cris supports the need for women to be able to support themselves (a traditionally feminist view) while also

dreaming of being supported by a man (a traditionally non-feminist view). That Cris is a duchess also removes her from the plight of the working class woman. Cris reflects on this contradicion while living in luxury at the Prynce-Valmore estate, saying "Dios mío, haber nacido mujer…, delicada…, sensible…, frágil… y tener que hacerse la fuerte…, la valiente…, la resuelta…! ¡Tener que defenderse, y que luchar, y que sufrir con una sonrisa a flor de labios! ¡Para que no sepan lo que hay detrás…!" (152). She mentions throughout the novel that a woman's role is to give, while a man's is to receive, "había que pasarse la vida dando y ella tenía ganas de recibir…No de querer…, no de mimar…, sino de ser querida…, de ser mimada…En su breve paso por la vida ella había dado siempre…Y estaba cansada de dar…" (153). She fights for her ability to earn a living, yet yearns to be loved and to be taken care of. However, as she falls in love with Gary, Cris returns to former view of wanting to help him, thinking "Déjame ayudarte a llevar tu carga" (167). Again this contradiction surfaces when, near the end of the novel Joe dies and Gary does not seek her out, she cries, "¡Dar, dar siempre! ¡Y no recibir nunca!" (241).

Throughout the novel, we find various indications of feminist awareness that are then debated or denied, causing a somewhat contradictory reaction to today's reader. However, we must realize that Icaza, as suggested by Labanyi, had to work from within the system in order to create change. When writing her novels, she had both her political persuasion and the somewhat strict structural guidelines of the romance novel to follow, which diminished the extent to which she could question these systems. Salvador Faura states that Franco's "state-managed mass media promoted certain types of beginnings, endings, and codes, and these had to be adhered to by any author who wanted to write

novel rosa" (48); there was no choice—if an author wanted to publish, she must write something acceptable to the censors (Faura 49). Still, though, through the popular medium of the romance novel, Icaza was able to make an impression upon many people, especially women. The unnamed narrator in Carmen Martín Gaite's novel El cuarto de atrás states that Carmen de Icaza "era el ídolo de la postguerra, introdujo en el género la 'modernidad moderada', la protagonista…era valiente y trabajadora, se había liberado económicamente" (141).

Cris herself refers to living in a fairy tale while staying in the Prynce-Valmore estate (94, 148, 217). According to Martín Gaite in Usos amorosos de la postguerra, "aquellas protagonistas de las novelas, que se veían obligadas a trabajar, habían recibido casi indefectiblemente una educación esmerada, eran inteligentes, eficaces, guapas y sensibles, y por eso podían llegar a llamar la atención de un hombre de clase social superior" (145). Bridget Aldaraca affirms that, according to nineteenth century Spanish literature, "an educated woman makes home life more smooth and pleasant" (70), a statement that to her reaffirms a wife's submission to her husband because a woman is educated only for the benefit of a man, her husband. Even while this novel subscribes to the basic format of a romance novel, it also instills a sense of an upcoming change for women and their possibilities for economic independence.

Cristina Guzmán achieved such popularity that it was made into two movies, a theatre production, a radio show, and a television show; it was also translated into eight languages (Cristina Guzmán 1991: 33). In her introduction to the 1991 version of the novel, Paloma Montojo, daughter of Carmen de Icaza, explains that "hay que tener en cuenta el fenómeno sociológico que supuso que en un momento dado una gran cantidad

de mujeres se identificaran con Cristina Guzmán y la tomaran como ejemplo, sencillamenta porque ella representa el triunfo de la bondad, del optimismo y la alegría de vivir" (33). The phenomenon that Montojo mentions is the importance of this novel and its author; they serve as a source of influence not only in the 1930s and 1940s but also today.

At the end of the twentieth century, while the traditional *novela rosa* was still popular, Lucía Etxebarria, winner of the Premio de Primavera in 2001 and of the Premio Nadal in 1998, entitled her best-selling novel Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes: una novela rosa. This novel, as pointed out by Kathryn Everly, while dealing with the same themes of the romance novel—love, desire, the situation of women—subverts this genre, but, by using this term, it gives credit to the importance of the romance novel as a precursor for Spanish women authors (297). Not only does Icaza deserve acknowledgement for the many romance novels she wrote during Franco's dictatorship, when she had to work within the strict censorship of the time in order to publish her novels, but she also deserves recognition for being a predecessor for contemporary women writers in Spain. Her ability to use her position of power during a fascist government to give voice to certain women's concerns, such as the right to work and not be judged for this work, shows her commitment to feminism. Despite the neglect suffered by this genre of writing, Carmen de Icaza can be seen as an important literary figure of the early part of twentieth century in Spain.

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Notes:

[1] According to statistics provided by www.escritoras.com.

[2] There are, of course, exceptions to this failure. Some examples of women dedicated to the feminist movement in Spain are Clara Campoamor, Victoria Kent, Margarita Nelken, and María Martínez Sierra.

[3] This number becomes more astonishing when realizing that Madrid did not reach 1 million inhabitants until 1940.

[4] All textual quotes from the novel come from the 1942 version listed in the section of Works Consulted unless otherwise noted.

[5] Carmen Primo de Rivera was the head of the Sección Femenina.

[6] According to María Giambelli, at the beginning of the 1930s, it is estimated that about half of the women in Spain were illiterate.

[7] According to Publishers Weekly, romance novels in the US make up almost half of all paperback fiction sold. (Publishers Weekly June 13, 2005)