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“To Say Nothing”: Variations on the Theme of Silence in Selected Works by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sandra Cisneros, and María Luisa Bombal

Abstract

This paper explores the various ways in which Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *La Respuesta*, Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek,” and María Luisa Bombal’s “The Tree” address the theme of silence. It interrogates how the female characters in each of these works are silenced as well as their responses to that oppression. Meaning is subjective, so writing is a safe outlet for the oppressed. These works each identify an oppressor, either a husband or the male dominated church, as well as an oppressed individual, who is the female lead. In *La Respuesta*, the Catholic church, and specifically “Sor Filotea” tries to silence Sor Juana. She regards silence as a tool because “what it signifies may be understood” in its absence (43). Brígida, from Bombal’s “The Tree” suffers under the oppression of her aged husband, Luis. She uses silence as a weapon and chooses it to rebel against her inability to communicate. Cisneros focuses very specifically on language and the ability to produce sound in “Woman Hollering Creek.” Her female character, Cleófilas, is silenced by her husband’s physical and emotional abuse. She must literally break her silence with a holler in order to overcome his oppression. Each of these women regards silence differently, but in one form or another, each of their female characters manages to break through that silence and out of their oppression.

Keywords

literature, silence, women, feminism

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Literature | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority | Women's Studies

Comments

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“To Say Nothing”:

Variations on the Theme of Silence in Selected Works by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,

Sandra Cisneros, and María Luisa Bombal

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WGS 221/ LAS 222

Professor Isabel Valiela

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Written language can represent fact and fiction, and it has been the basis for great debate throughout history. It has also been used as a form of expression for centuries. Often times, writing reflects the voice of the oppressed because it is an indirect means for expression. It offers an outlet for both creative ideas and protest. Written language offers a unique discourse for the oppressed: it can exist singularly without incriminating an author. One can use literal words to make one claim but mean something entirely different through the use of irony or metaphor. Meaning is subjective, so writing is a safe outlet for the oppressed. It is common for oppressed bodies of people to be silenced by the oppressors. Writing does not break silence literally, so it is a common vocal outlet.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is just one example of an individual that used writing to safely express the various silences she was forced to take as dictated both by society and the Catholic church. Numerous scholars, including Electra Arenal and Amanda Powell who wrote the article “A Life Without and Within: Juana Ramírez/ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648/51-1695),” have spent time studying her life and work. Juana Ramírez, or Sor Juana, lived in Mexico during the seventeenth century. She was incredibly bright as a young girl and quickly set her sights on an educated lifestyle. According to Arenal and Powell, Sor Juana “devoured books” as she came across them (69).

However, Mexico did not allow women to attend the university at that time. The only place she could “decently live alone and devote herself to learning” was a convent (69). Sor Juana herself explains in *La Respuesta* that her desire to learn and to write “has never proceeded from any dictate of [her] own but a force beyond [her]” (47). She believes that her desire for education is a natural instinct that she had to seek out extreme

means to fulfill. At one point she even compares her desire to learn as being caught “with fire,” which strikes an image of sincere passion (49).

Although Sor Juana could advance her studies further in the convent, there were certain silences she had to maintain. For example, as a nun she had to silence any sexual desires she might have had, which some scholars attribute as sexual attraction to women. Such scholars derive this idea from the fact that she dedicated two love poems to women. Sor Juana expresses both “emotion” and “exotic desire” in these poems, but would have been unable to act upon her desires so long as she had been true to the vows she took upon entering the convent (Arenal and Powell 75). Her poetry exists in place of any sexual desires she had. The technique she uses here of using written language in place of action because that action is unachievable is also used in *La Respuesta*.

La Respuesta is Sor Juana’s response letter to criticism she received for being an outspoken and well-educated woman. The bishop of Puebla to the pseudonym “Sir Filotea” wrote a letter that criticized her, and *La Respuesta* was a manifestation of “anger, resentment, shock, contempt, and fear” (Arenal and Powell 78). She took these emotions, and, according to Arenal and Powell, “precipitated a decision to silence herself that had already been forming within her” (78). The “decision to silence herself” to which they refer is not a decision to work constructively with the criticism she received, but rather to battle it with complicated rhetoric and irony. Sor Juana’s biting wit and intelligence is key to understanding this letter. Silence is a key theme in her letter. She addresses it in regard to women, nuns, as well as Biblical figures. Sor Juana’s analysis and ironic discussion of silence continues to inform writers even today.

In the following passage from *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana very clearly defines her views on silence and how it should be treated:

“And therefore I had nearly resolved to leave the matter in silence; yet although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing” (42-43).¹

Silence, by definition, is the absence of sound, or the absence of response. The fact that she addresses it in a letter that is given the title “The Answer” defies the notion that she accepts silence. In this passage she claims “silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained,” but that statement leaves room for the reader to question how silence can explain if it is indeed lacking in sound and therefore meaning. She also uses the phrase “name the silence,” but that also poses the question as to how one can name something that does not exist. While outwardly discussing silence, she has already redefined what silence is, and as a result has created a very complicated rhetoric for her readers. She regards the idea of “nam[ing]” the silence as a “negative thing,” which demonstrates that her words ask her readers not to name where her silences are, an idea that adheres to what the church would condone. Instead she asks that it might be “understood” rather than named. Without outwardly saying such, Sor Juana is asking her readers to read between the lines. She does not want them to “fail that silence” that she

¹ Robert McDonald discusses this passage differently in his article “An Incredible Graph: Sor Juana’s Respuesta.” He explores the difference between “saying and voice” and asserts that “saying exceeds the voice, and silence is a march of that excess” (306). Through this statement he concludes that by “diminishing” the voice by using written text instead of a literal voice, she thus “elevates the value of silence” (306). Although not completely relevant to my discussion of this topic, his argument is compelling and provocative.

creates, but rather to understand it and know where gaps exist so that they can understand the oppression under which she suffers.

The above passage clearly exemplifies Sor Juana's complex discursive style by addressing her use of the signified versus the signifier. She explores other methods for combating the silences forced upon her in addition to this one. She uses many biblical references to support her statements because they are indisputable for the church, which is the main position against which she argues. In describing Jesus' ascent into heaven, she explains that Jesus could not put into the words the magnificence of heaven. She explains to her readers that "silences is kept not for lack of things to say, but because the many things there are to say cannot be contained in mere words" (43). Thus, one can take her statement and apply it to her own situation. She does not keep silence because she has nothing to say but rather that the complexity of her experience is so unique that it is nearly impossible to assign words to them.

In his article "An Incredible Graph: Sor Juana's Respuesta," Robert McDonald addresses the key issue of the autobiographical element's in Sor Juana's writing. Sor Juana uses autobiographical examples explicitly in her writing, which makes it natural to also regard her rhetorical statements as very personal. He explains that in literary criticism "writing and reading are seen as less neutral and transparent, they are still to be gotten 'through' in order to get at the textual self or identity" (298). In using his statement to interrogate Sor Juana's response, one can identify the "textual identity" as Sor Juana's voice. McDonald acknowledges that it is "indisputable" that *La Respuesta* is "about the self," but what readers need to question is "how the self is written and what it

means to be *written*” (298). In this statement, he suggests that although written expression is literally silent, its existence suggests an entity with a voice to be heard.

He more clearly explains this idea in the following quote:

“The written word does not speak; it cannot guide the reader by explaining what it means, but only repeats what it said before without the slightest possible difference. The written word can never rise up and go beyond itself because it lacks the ability to respond and explain itself. It is like a tomb from which the soul has departed” (McDonald 303).

Sor Juana turns to writing because it is not a verbal remonstrance within irony can be more obviously unveiled. Since writing cannot “go beyond itself” and explain its meaning, it puts the power in the hands of the reader. Interpretation is completely subjective, which is precisely what Sor Juana relies upon in *La Respuesta*. She also acknowledges that language can be dangerous, and if used inappropriately “it is like putting a sword in the hands of a madman” (81). In this statement, she acknowledges that people can misuse language, which leads readers to believe that it can be misinterpreted as well. That is why Sor Juana previously explained that one should not “name the silence” because those that want to use her words against her will find points of contention (43). However, those that choose to align their thinking with Sor Juana can also read into warning about the dangers of language and see that it can also be a more heroic “sword” that combats oppression and violence.

Sor Juana debated the idea of language being used as a weapon roughly two hundred and fifty years before María Luisa Bombal began writing. Despite the gap in time, Bombal addresses very similar issues to Sor Juana, and specifically looks at the theme of language, or lack thereof, as a weapon in her short story “The Tree.” This short story explores the failing marriage between Brígida and Luis as told by an anonymous

narrator from a space in the future where Brígida attends a concert Brígida, like Sor Juana, is silent by choice. After failing to communicate with her husband for nearly a year, Brígida decides to use “a weapon she had discovered without thinking” and vows unbreakable silence against her husband (Bombal 58). The reader continues to see her inability to communicate with Luis as she categorizes her silence as “a complaint,” but if she does not actually verbalize her concern then it cannot actually be a complaint, only a protest (59). She makes the decision to remain silent because it is the only communication she understands, and the only action that gets a strong reaction from her husband. It is possible that Brígida chooses silence because her language does not fit into Luis’s male language. Brígida’s silence in “The Tree” is a weapon that she uses to demonstrate her need to form a feminine language.

In her feminist essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous discusses phallogocentric, or male dominated, language and literature (880). Cixous encouraged women to “write about women and bring women to writing” because literature and language have been dominated by men for centuries (875). While Brígida as a character does not adhere to Cixous’s advice and bring women into the literary world, her actions suggest the same frustration with a male-centered language.

Nina M. Scott explores a similar feminist discourse in her essay “Verbal and Nonverbal Messages in María Luisa Bombal’s ‘El árbol.’” She explains that Brígida and Luis’s marriage fails because of “their inability to communicate with each other,” and that “Brígida must arrive at a conscious use of her own language” in order for her to be free (3). Scott explains that Bombal “neatly underscores not only the ongoing impossibility of communication” between the couple, as demonstrated by the fact that

they never have successful conversations, “but the fact that in general a woman’s answer is unintelligible in a man’s world” (9). This conclusion is a very pointed agreement with Cixous’s general discussion of phallogocentric language. Luis simply cannot understand Brígida because they do not speak the same language. Brígida must find her own identity and form of communication.

In the present timeline of the short story, Brígida does not speak. Instead she listens to the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin. As the narrator recounts Brígida’s story, the music reacts to each of her emotional moments. For example, “Mozart takes her nervously by the hand” as she thinks about why she left her husband, and the “waves” of Beethoven’s music “crash” when she gets angry with Luis’s decision to leave her with her father while he travels (53, 56). Brígida fails to communicate with her husband, as is apparent in her constant repetition of “Luis, Luis, Luis...” whenever she is upset with him (57). However, the music is able to more successfully communicate her emotion. The narrator describes Chopin’s music as “rain, secret and steady,” which occurs when she is sad and chooses to leave him. The rain in the music represents her tears. Although she cannot put into words what makes her so sad, the music is able to react in equivalence with her emotions.

Although Brígida never finds her actual voice, it is possible that she instead discovers her own language through music. The difference in her experience as opposed to Sor Juana’s lies in not only the eras within which they each lived, but also in their classes and education. Scott explains Brígida’s position with the following passage:

“Brígida has failed in her efforts to communicate with Luis, she is plagued by feelings of personal inadequacy and as a woman of the upper classes she is not only confined to her house but condemned to inactivity. The

result is that Brígida disengages from life and lets herself drift into a position of passive nonresponsibility” (Scott 7).

The idea of “nonresponsibility” to which Scott refers is Brígida’s decision not to respond to any of the woman in the concert call, as well as her choice to remain silent from Luis. She “disengages from life” and becomes “passive” only because that is the ultimate rebellion that she can commit. As an upper class woman, Brígida would be expected to keep the home and tend to her husband. Her role is to please him and others around her. But if she chooses not to respond to her husband’s desires immediately, she is rebelling from him. She does not simply lose the ability to respond, but rather makes a choice to do so. Her rebellion differs from Sor Juana’s because her expectations were different as a wife. Sor Juana chose not to become anyone’s wife when she entered the convent. Brígida’s rebellion must be different because she is in a completely different situation. Sor Juana finds a figurative voice in ironic writing, whereas Brígida finds a figurative voice through music and the use of silence as a weapon.

Neither of these women fully breaks silence in the most literal way. That device is left to Cleófilas in Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Woman Hollering Creek.” This story, much like Bombal’s “The Tree,” also explores a failing marriage between Cleófilas and Juan Pedro. There are very stark differences in their relationship, however. For example, Juan Pedro physically abuses Cleófilas, which causes a different kind of damage than Luis’s neglect of Brígida. This story simultaneously explores Cleófilas’s forced silence about her suffering as well as the movement towards breaking that silence as compared with the hollering from “La Gritona” or “La Llorona.” Cleófilas first encounters the creek directly after she marries Juan Pedro and crosses it from Mexico into Texas. The narrator describes the name as “funny,” and later Cleófilas actually laughs at the name because it

was “such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (Cisneros 46-47).

Harryette Mullen tries to explain Cleófilas’s reaction in her essay “‘A Silence between Us like a Language’: The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*.” She explains that Cisneros translates “La Llorona” to “La Gritona” which shifts the meaning from “weeping woman” to “shouting woman” (11-12). According to her, this translation “allows a greater set of possibilities for interpreting the cry of the restless spirit” because the idea of shouting can be interpreted as either sad or joyous (42). The reader can sense that much of Cleófilas’s silence is derived from her inability to communicate with the multiple new cultures she enters including that of marriage and of the American lifestyle. She questions a Laundromat attendant about the name of the creek, but when she gets nowhere, she acknowledges that “there was no sense talking to [her]” because she could not understand the fascination with a hollering woman (46).

That is only the beginning of Cleófilas’s silence. It extends farther after Juan Pedro hits her for the first time and she “didn’t cry out or try to defend herself” (47). It is as if her verbal silence extends into her physical inability to react. Afterwards, she “could think of nothing to say, said nothing” and spends years doing so when she does not tell anyone about the abuse he inflicts upon her (48). She is literally silent about the actions being done to her.

Cisneros focuses upon the physical sounds of voice throughout “*Woman Hollering Creek*” instead of the metaphoric silences that Sor Juana describes. She uses very tangible adjectives when describing verbal sounds. For example, she describes a

belch with the following passage: “It bubbles and rises, it gurgle in the throat, it rolls across the surface of the tongue, and erupts from the lips” (48). A belch is an uncontrolled action that can be both felt and heard, and like speaking, is a natural process. In passages like this one, Cisneros makes clear that she sees the verbal expression, the literal breaking of silence, as a sign of liberation. When Cleófilas finally escapes her husband, “the rival...the master,” she marks her liberation with a holler as she crosses “La Gritona” (49). Cisneros describes her voice as a “gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56). The likeness to water evokes an image of nature, and one that flows calmly. Mullen explains that Cleófilas’s expression marks her discovery of a “feminist message of survival in the haunted voice of the creek that hollers with the rage of a silent woman” (Mullen 12). Her assessment of the lesson that Cleófilas learns suggests that there is rage to be found in forced silence and that breaking that “haunted” existence is ultimately a feminist action.

Cisneros’s approach to feminine silence is completely different from Sor Juana’s and Bombal’s. Instead of asking readers to find messages within silences or to use silence as a weapon to form one’s own language, she suggests in “Woman Hollering Creek” that women should break silences. By describing Cleófilas’s first holler as “a ribbon of laughter” she suggests that breaking silence is a joyous occasion (56). Perhaps Cisneros’s break from Sor Juana’s rhetoric on silence also has to do with her new generation. Cisneros is writing over three hundred years after Sor Juana, and since then women have made significant gains in society. Unlike Sor Juana, Cisneros herself was able to study at the university level, which gave her the skills to use her literary as well as physical voice. She did not have to hide her love for education and writing that Sor Juana did when she

entered the convent. Although Sor Juana was quite obviously progressive for her time, she was still confined by the restrictions of her strictly Catholic society.

Had Sor Juana lived in Cisneros's lifetime perhaps she would have been a feminist activist and writer. It is impossible to say certainly. What is certain, however, is that Sor Juana's writing laid the groundwork for modern women. Without her ability to secretly break silences through twisted rhetoric in writing, women such as Bombal and Cisneros never would have had the appropriate support to find their respective voices as female writers. Whether or not women still adhere to Sor Juana's advice "to say nothing" in order for others to find meaning within silence is irrelevant because each female writer is managing to find new ways to battle oppressive silence.

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I affirm that I will uphold the highest principles of honesty and integrity in all my endeavors at Gettysburg College and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect within and beyond the classroom.