
Hegemonic Subversion: Manuel Puig's Experimentation in Narrative Technique in Heartbreak Tango (Boquitas Pintadas)

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Abstract:

Among many Latin American novelists Manuel Puig is best known for his creative style and experimentation with narrative techniques in his novels. Though Puig has lived very little span of his adulthood in Argentina, most of his novels are set in Argentinian milieu. The very use of tango as a cultural base of this novel has its origin in Argentina. It has not only voiced the use of popular culture in Puig's novel but has given him the potentiality to construct his narrative through popular forms rather than using grand narratives. As a matter fact in Heartbreak Tango, Puig has used a number of narrative devices throughout the novel. As in a film director uses a series of technique to tell the story to the audience; in novel Puig has achieved the same end by introducing different narrative devices.

In most of the Latin American literary artifacts as well as in society a strong patriarchal hegemony is evident; moreover, the concept of 'machismo' in Latin American society is very much popular. Puig, through collage of narratives, has tried to subvert the dominant Latin American ideology in his novels. Therefore, in this paper I intend to portray how Manuel Puig, in his novel Heartbreak Tango, has voiced the subversion of the Latin American hegemony through using several narrative devices and traits.

Key words: Narrative technique, experimentation, hegemony, patriarchy, machismo, Latin American ideology, subversion.

Among many Latin American novelists Manuel Puig is best known for his creative style, experimentation with narrative techniques and remarkably different plot in his novels. Within his life span of fifty eight years he has written seven novels and also worked simultaneously as a script writer of popular films. Puig's novel *Heartbreak Tango* (Spanish: *Boquitas Pintadas*, i.e. painted little mouth) is recognized as one of his great novels. It is interesting to trace the narrative technique that has been employed by Puig in this novel.

In an interview with Kathleen Wheaton, Puig has revealed his interest in films in constructing the narratives of his novels. Though Puig has lived very little span of his adulthood in Argentina, most of his novels are set in Argentinian milieu. The very use of tango as a cultural base of this novel has its origin in Argentina. It has not only voiced the use of popular culture in Puig's novel but has given him the potentiality to construct his narrative through popular forms rather than using grand narratives. As a matter fact in *Heartbreak Tango*, Puig has used a number of narrative devices throughout the novel. As a film director uses a series of technique to tell the story to the audience; in novel Puig has achieved the same end by introducing different narrative devices. According to Puig's interviewer Wheaton:

Puig's early passion for the movies is evident both in his narrative style, which relies heavily on dialogue, and in the lives of his characters, where the glamorous and idealized world of films serves as a counterpoint to their own disappointments. (Paris Review - The Art of Fiction No. 114, Manuel Puig.)

In this paper I intend to portray how Manuel Puig, in his novel *Heartbreak Tango*, has used several narrative devices and traits to voice the subversion of the Latin American hegemony. In most of the Latin American literary artifacts as well as in society a strong patriarchal hegemony is evident; moreover, the concept of 'machismo' in Latin American society is very much popular. But this concept of masculinity is not a natural phenomenon that existed ever since from the genesis of Latin American society; rather it is very much a colonial project. This fact is very true to most of the geographical locale where changing or re-shaping the local type of masculinity has given a social control to the colonizers. Therefore, to Connell: "Latin American machismo was a product of the interplay of cultures under colonialism." (Masculinities, p.198) She further elaborates her strand:

In colonies where conquered populations were not displaced or massacred but were made into a subordinated labour force on the spot - most of Latin America, India and South-East Asia and parts of Africa - the gender consequences involved a reshaping of local culture under the pressure of the colonizers. The British in India constructed different images of masculinity for different peoples under their rule, for instance, contrasting effeminate Bengalis with fierce Pathans and Sikhs. Like the ideology of white military masculinity discussed earlier, this imagery probably had a role in recruitment and social control. (Masculinities, p.198)

Therefore, the so called 'ever fixed', 'stereotyped' Latin American machismo has been questioned in most of Puig's novels. In an interview with Wheaton Puig says: "...machismo for me is the basic question of my existence." So, throughout the whole novel Puig has not only questioned the concept of machismo but has also voiced his agenda for subverting this colonialist project of masculinity through adopting different narrative devices in his novels.

The very first episode in *Heartbreak Tango* introduces an obituary “notice appearing in the April 1947 edition of the monthly publication “Our Neighborhood,” printed in the town of Vallejos, Province of Buenos Aires” where the untimely passing of Juan Carlos Etchepare, the central male character in this novel is reported. In the very beginning the obituary notice of the central character not only signifies an important turn of event but also signifies the death of the patriarchal voice in this novel. Therefore, Juan Carlos as a character in the novel will be reconstructed through the letters, reports, incidents and other devices by the central female protagonist of the novel, Nene. Symbolically the diseased tuberculosis affected body of Juan Carlos points the absence of Latin American ‘machismo’ in this novel.

To say in brief, the plot of the novel deals with two love triangles: Nelida, Juan Carlos, Mabel; La Raba, Mabel and Pancho. The original text of the novel i.e. *Boquitas Pintadas* subtitled *Folletin* [Pamphlet] consists of Parts I and II, each divided into eight installments, numbered from I to XVI. Each Chapter is introduced by quotations from lyrics of tangos of the thirties, composed mainly by Alfredo Le Pera. The use of tango as a cultural text in this respect is very significant and it clearly creates a subtext of Argentinian popular culture in this novel. The cultural forms of Tango as well as Bolero depends upon gendered performance of male and female performer and Puig uses this popular cultural form to construct dialogues of different narratives throughout this novel.

Technically speaking the major portion of the novel is written in epistolary form. Epistolary novel in English Literature has emerged with Richardson’s *Pamela* and later entered into grand narratives. However, Puig’s *Heartbreak Tango* does not use a single narrative device; rather it creates a dialogue of different narratives as a film uses different devices and levels of narration to convey plot to the audience. Puig’s interest in films can be noticed in the fact that despite his

interest in literature, psychology, and philosophy his primary interest was to direct films. Therefore, filmic narrative has deeply influenced Puig's narrative techniques in his novels. Despite the fact that Puig has never become a director, films were always a constant inspirations to him. To quote Puig:

There are many like me who are interested in certain periods and nationalities. For instance, I'm extremely interested in Mexican films from the forties and fifties. The world doesn't know what it's missing. There is a very silly prejudice against certain movie nationalities, so many films are simply discarded, though they're gems. In fact, I think the best Latin American films come from Mexico, at least from that very particular period. From a sociological point of view, the Argentine films are also of interest to me. (Paris Review - The Art of Fiction No. 114, Manuel Puig.)

So, similarly as film Puig has tried to break the narrative of this novel in smaller fragmented parts which not only gives him the effect of micro-narrative in his novel but also creates polyphony of voices throughout the novel. To create this polyphony, Puig adapts a combination of verbal forms encountered by his characters in their daily existence- dialogue, interior monologue, radio soap opera and telephone conversations- with written and visual forms such as letters, newspaper clippings, picture albums etc. The epistolary part of the novel majorly uses Nene's letters written to Juan Carlos and his mother. Therefore, throughout the major portion of the novel we find female voices. The male characters in this novel are portrayed in a disempowered state. The male characters that we hear in this novel are Juan Carlos, Pancho and Nene's husband. The former is dead in the very first chapter of the novel and had possessed a very fragile diseased body; whereas Pancho though having 'macho-masculine' body is nothing but a social climber and Nene's husband never gets any voice except some passing references. Thus, the centrality of the narratives is constructed by the female characters.

When we focus on the other narrative devices used in this novel, we understand that Puig, through his use of varied narrative devices has tried to give a greater credibility to his novel. At first, as well in the subsequent chapters, with the use of epistolary form, Puig brings forth the glimpse of actions, surroundings and circumstances of the narrator after writing the letter which gives a psychological dimension of the narrative. Shifting the perspective of writing into omniscient narrative and giving brief meticulous details of the surroundings incorporates a film-like editing style into the narrative. This shift in narrative devices can be cited in *Heartbreak Tango* when Nélide is writing a letter to Juan Carlos's mother, Mrs. Etchepare in the first chapter:

[Epistolary Form]

...I don't know if you still hold a grudge against me, Mrs. Etchepare, but in any case I sincerely hope the good lord is with you in this hour of need, it must be hard to resign oneself to such a loss, a son already a full grown man.

In spite of three hundred and two miles that separates Buenos Aires from Vallejos, I am by your side in this moment. Even though you may not wish it, let me pray with you.

Nélide Fernández de Massa

[Now, the narrative shifts into omniscient narrator giving meticulous details of the immediate actions, surroundings and circumstances of the narrator.]

Under the florescent light in the kitchen, she looks at her hands after closing the ink bottle, and noticing that the fingers which held the pen are stained, she goes to sink to wash them off. With a stone she removes the ink and dries her hand with a dishtowel. She takes the envelop, wets the gummed edge with saliva and looks for a second in the multicolored rhombuses on the oilcloth which covers the table. (*Heartbreak Tango*, p.10)

This frequent shift into narrative from epistolary and giving the glimpse of the narrator's surroundings and mental condition gives a psychological credibility and edge to the narrative. We can guess under what circumstances the narrator is writing the letter and this technique justifies narrator's perspective to the readers.

Apart from these two devices a number of techniques have been introduced e.g. radio commercials, notices, description of picture albums etc. which give readers a varied angle to read this novel. By using these techniques in Heartbreak Tango, Puig consolidates the struggle between high and mass culture.

Conclusion:

So, as we can see that Puig, in his novel *Heartbreak Tango*, has tried to subvert the dominant Latin American ideology in several levels. Firstly, by giving voice to the female characters and silencing the male. The so called Latin American hegemonic masculine men are almost absent throughout this novel. The character of Pancho though physically appears as 'macho masculine', always remains in the novel as socially inferior figure and ultimately dies in the hand of a woman. Juan Carlos, representing the figure of 'Don Juan' in this novel dies in his youth in tuberculosis. Even when we read Juan Carlos's letters we find that Juan Carlos' schooling is poor in comparison to Nelida's. This is revealed by his many spelling errors (he takes his letters to a patient in room 14 to have him correct the spelling). Throughout the novel, we can trace a lack of 'machismo' in the male characters as well as observe patriarchy losing its grip over symbolic. Thus Puig, through collage of narratives, has tried to subvert the dominant Latin American ideology in *Heartbreak Tango*.

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