

The Coastal Review: An Online Peer-reviewed Journal

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Summer 2011*

Article 2

6-2011

Writing the Female Body in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*

Darren K. Broome
Gordon College - Barnesville, dbroome@gordonstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/thecoastalreview>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Latina/o Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Broome, Darren K. (2011) "Writing the Female Body in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*," *The Coastal Review: An Online Peer-reviewed Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.20429/cr.2011.030102

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/thecoastalreview/vol3/iss1/2>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Coastal Review: An Online Peer-reviewed Journal by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Writing the Female Body in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*

Darren Broome

Gordon College

Barnesville, Georgia, USA

Abstract

Julia Alvarez in *In the Time of the Butterflies* utilizes the female body and sexuality to combat male dominated rhetoric. The use of the female body retrieves women's forgotten role as subjects instead of objects as seen in male-oriented novel. Expressing sexuality in a way that is determined by women, she discovers new means of verbal or written expression. The female body emerges as a form of expression in *Butterflies* which at times is connected to one of the characters' revolutionary participation.

How does a "body" of literature relate to a physical body? There is an intimate association between women's bodies and their voices, both having for so long been repressed and controlled by male-dominated institutions. By "finding a voice," a woman may liberate her physical power and sexuality from her internal and external repression. In the same way, through expressing her sexuality in a way that is determined by her own body and her own desire, she may discover new means of verbal or written expression. In the works of numerous women writers and theorists, it is necessary to reclaim the body in order to establish a voice. We can say that through embodiment comes empowerment.

The essence of the female body emerges as a form of expression in *Butterflies* which at times is connected to one of the character's revolutionary participation. In Alvarez's text, the potential for giving life and taking it away are apparent in the physical aspects of the female body, such as menstruation, pregnancy and sexuality, which will be topics of discussion. The bodily existence of the Mirabal sisters can be related to Michel Foucault's notion of the "body politic," which he defines as "a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (28). By way of the corporeal history of the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez demonstrates the active resistance of women revolutionaries.

The way the author transforms the legacy of the Mirabals' female bodies into fictionalized dialogue on the body is connected to the idea of "écriture feminine." This aspect of French Feminism supports the notion that women see their bodies as the center of consciousness. In the case of the Mirabals, their bodies are the center of political "consciousness." Margarite Fernandez Olmos comments on this "consciousness": "Firmly rooted in the consciousness of contemporary Latina authors is the idea that what is personal is also political" (45). Helene Cixous' essay "The Laugh of Medusa" argues this philosophy as well. Cixous offers a way for women to see themselves as giving birth to language. In other words, women writing has less to do with language itself and more to do with how women deploy their given language. Cixous asserts that women who "write their bodies" [1] express ideas in a very different way from men, stating, "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own way" (337). Alvarez retells the Mirabals' stories through the corporeal aspects of these women and

she connects their political consciousness to their bodies. Retelling the stories of these four sisters via the female body makes the narrative both private and personal.

Obviously, it is extremely difficult to encapsulate neatly all of the theories of a "feminine writing." The theories themselves are often free-flowing and disruptive in their language, and each highlights the impossibility of definition. Such theories have been criticized as much as they have been celebrated. What becomes more problematic is that the majority of critical work on feminine studies has been conducted by French and North American critics. In *Reading the Body Politic*, Amy Kaminsky writes:

The apparently politically neutral psychoanalytical and semiotic criticism that has been called French feminism is useful only up to a point in creating a Latin American feminist analysis. The emphasis on being embodied, and even 'writing the body,' can be liberating for women as writers and readers, but what can happen to women's bodies in politically repressive regimes is hardly *the jouissance* that Helene Cixous had in mind. (23)

Certainly Kaminsky's point is one that must be kept in mind, and the unquestioning applications of theories that are linguistically and historically foreign to Latin American texts is indeed a disservice. I am not arguing that such theories have no place in the critical strategies for the study of Latin American women writers. However, the incidents of violence in Latin America are extreme and singular cases. "Female writers in Latin America had to confront the problem of surviving as individuals in a society that has traditionally been among the most restrictive regarding appropriate social roles for women, where those who defied convention often suffered dire consequences" (Fernández Olmos, 23).

Alvarez undoubtedly "defies convention" as she constructs the female body as a vehicle for empowerment, voice, and ultimately, change. One way Alvarez demonstrates the history of the Mirabals is by illustrating the gynecological changes of the sisters. Throughout the novel, changes in political events in the Dominican Republic seem to coincide with the changes occurring in the bodies of the Mirabal sisters. She illustrates that pregnancy and childbirth have several meanings. In her novel Alvarez shows the real potential of women through the material body enabling women to be seen as active revolutionaries. Due to the fact that all of the sisters except for Dede narrate in first person, they are allowed to speak candidly about their intimate thoughts.

The political coming of age or consciousness of the next to oldest sister, Minerva, comes with the onset of menstruation occurring when her boarding school friend, Sinita, informs her that Trujillo had some of her family members murdered. Minerva states, "As I came fully awake, I felt the damp sheet under me. I lifted the covers, and for a moment, I couldn't make sense of the dark stains on the bottom sheet. Then I brought up my hand from checking myself. Sure enough, my complications had started" (20). Minerva's discharge represents the spilling of waste matter. We can correlate her menses with Trujillo murdering citizens who oppose his doctrines for Trujillo looks down at them as trash or

waste. Fernando Valerio Holguin supports the idea that the female body manifests itself as a form of political resistance in saying: "El acceso a la conciencia política coincide con la transformación de su cuerpo. La sangre de la menstruación de Minerva queda vinculada no solo con la violación sino también con la violencia como crítica feminista al patriarcado trujillista" (96). Menstruation does not ordinarily figure in either idealized or earthly erotic descriptions of the female body; it is usually one aspect of women's sexuality of no interest to men. In other words, the female body can be read as an allegory of political resistance and enacts a "writing the body" as an act of resistance to patriarchal law. Debra Walter King in her essay "Writing in Red Ink" writes about resistance and liberation as it appears in the fiction of black women writers. She points out that "This spilling of blood intensifies moments of liberation and is often its prerequisite" (57).

Another reference to menstruation suggests both solidarity and resistance: Maria Teresa comments that while in prison, "almost everyone has stopped menstruating" (240). The political activity of the members of the movement has stopped since they are incarcerated, but one can understand the cessation of menstruation of the incarcerated women as a political act since it can be read as an allegory of the political situation of the underground movement. Shortly after Minerva and Maria Teresa are released from prison, Minerva visits Delia, a movement member, who is a gynecologist. Minerva makes this visit with the pretext of discussing her menstrual problems. Again, the female body becomes an allegory of the political situation.

'Delia is a female doctor and we have plenty of reason to see her. Neither Mate nor I had had a period for two months.' Delia was nervous as she let us into her small office, her eyes full of signals. 'We came about our cycles,' I began, searching the wall for the telltale rod. Whatever it was, all the SIM got at first was an earful about our women problems. Delia relaxed, thinking that was truly why we were here. Until I concluded a little too unmetaphorically, 'So is there any activity in our old cells?' 'A few of them are still active, to be sure. But more importantly, new cells are filling in all the time. You need to give your bodies a rest. You should see menstrual activity by the beginning of next year. (270)

This conversation between Minerva and the gynecologist has both a metaphorical and literal meaning. Minerva has to speak in her code language about female problems even though she is there in the doctor's office to discuss the issue of "cells" which refer to revolutionary activists. Obviously the "cells" and "systems" refer to active participants of the underground movement which Minerva helped form. While at times the body politic functions at an unconscious level for the sisters, other times they will consciously utilize this body function as discourse for revolution. While visiting with the female doctor, Minerva and Maria Teresa use a disguised discourse about female problems to speak of revolutionary activities.

This gynecological discourse-vaginal secretions, breast milk, and menstrual blood that emanate from a woman's body-has long been associated with her "otherness" with respect to man, and this "otherness" is often interpreted as either mystical, repulsive, or simply threatening in its foreignness. In *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin outlines some of the historical factors related to the association of women's fluids with shame and dirt. She connects it to women's relegation to the private sector and to household dirt and

bodily fluids where it became her role to manage and sanitize. Just as she must control and eliminate the dirt of her house, she must also control and eliminate her own fluids that are considered dirty or shameful. Martin traces this alignment of the woman with household dirt to industrialization and the resulting division of labor that established women's only legitimate realm as the family and the house. She writes that the continuing subjugation of women is due in part to "our notion that women are intrinsically closely involved with the family where so many 'natural,' 'bodily' (and therefore lower) functions occur, whereas men are instinctively closely involved with the world or work where (at least for some) 'cultural,' 'mental,' and therefore higher functions occur" (17). While these female bodily fluids are life giving, the fluids are almost always presented in negative terms by men: they are dirty, sticky, contagious, dangerous or at times, simply withheld. Though women's fluids are seen as dirty and repulsive, they are also shown to possess other, very powerful qualities. The male characters in Alvarez's novel are unable to control these feminine aspects of the female body. Alvarez clearly demonstrates how menstrual fluids symbolize what cannot be dominated and how they are seen as weapons in the fight against male dominated society.

Another gynecological element is pregnancy. Revolution can be seen in the eldest sister Patria during her pregnancies. She is, above all, the most maternal of the sisters. She married young and lived a very domestic life. In the novel the fate of the country revolves around each of her pregnancies. With each one, she becomes more aware of the political situation of her country. During her first pregnancy, Patria suffers a miscarriage suggesting that she is struggling to bring out her political consciousness. Patria's miscarriage symbolizes an aborted birth of the revolution. That is, Patria's miscarriage demonstrates the difficulty of producing revolution. The fact that Patria undergoes this "aborted birth" supports her reluctance to join in the political movement. Indeed, she was the last of the three sisters to join. After the loss of the baby, Patria struggles with her beliefs, including her religious beliefs. She comments on her faith when discussing her miscarriage:

I stroked my aching belly. For days, I'd been feeling a heaviness inside me. I started noting the deadness in Padre Ignacio's voice, the tedium between the gospel and communion, the dry papery feel of the host in my mouth. And suddenly, I was crying in her arms, because I could feel the waters breaking, the pearl of great price slipping out, and I realized I was giving birth to something dead I had been carrying inside me. (152)

Clearly, the "something dead" is Patria's dead baby. Metaphorically, this dead body is Patria's "dead" faith and "dead" desire to participate in the political movement. Because of the miscarriage Patria is unable express her political beliefs for some time. It is important to note, however, that Patria will regain her faith when the Church partakes in the revolution.

Some years later, Patria's body converts into the "body politic" when she reflects back on her miscarriage and uses it to declare her place in the underground movement. When she goes on a religious retreat, she witnesses the murdering of a young boy, who was part of a resistance group: "Coming down that mountain. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child but that dead boy as well. My stillborn of thirteen years ago. My murdered son of a few hours ago" (162). Patria cannot forget the memory

of her miscarried child and connects it to the recently murdered boy. The memory of her child and the young boy impels her to take action by explaining, "I'm not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that's what You in Your great wisdom decide" (162). Indeed, this event triggered Patria's political consciousness, manifested in the act of declaring her position as a revolutionary. At the same time that Patria is developing into an active member of the resistance movement, her daughter Noris begins her first menstrual cycle. Patria states: "It was after that I noticed a change in her, as if her soul had at least matured and begun *its* cycles" (162).

Patria suffers a miscarriage with her first pregnancy, but becomes pregnant three more times. Her consciousness of the political situation of her country matures with each pregnancy. That is, Patria experiences "revolutionary gestation." Elaine Showalter expounds on this idea of "revolutionary gestation" in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." She coins the term "gynocritics" to discuss her definition of women's writing, which refers to the "history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (85). Patria's pregnancies and miscarriage becomes a signal in her life to break away from her self-doubt and to join the resistance movement. Grieving over her dead baby and the thirteen year old revolutionary she comments on what is alive inside her, "I kept my hand on my stomach, concentrating what was alive" (163). Patria decides to join the revolution just as she is about to give birth, "I was ready, big as I looked, heavy as I was" (163). She was attending a gathering at her church. Patria's fourth pregnancy signals her birth into the movement and in addition demonstrates the union of her religion and the revolution. It is not surprising that she names the fourth child Raul Ernesto after the Cuban "revolutionaries" (151) Raul Castro and Ernesto (Che) Guevara. Her religious chant is, "Amen to the revolution" (164). Patria shows her zeal and spirit for the revolution: "Yes, once my son was born. I'd be out there recruiting every campesino in Ojo de Agua, Conuco, Salcedo to the army of Our Lord. Patria Mercedes, how you've changed" (164). In essence, Patria transforms herself into the symbolic mother of the country as her name indicates. She clearly plays the motherly role of the sisters. As a mother she achieves "maternal" power, which according to Audre Lorde, in a patriarchal structure, "the only social power open to women" (111). Clearly, becoming a mother has matured Patria and has given her determination and "social power" to join in the revolution and become a strong advocate for the resistance.

While writing about these gynecological changes in the Mirabal sisters, it is as if Alvarez describes the act of writing like childbirth. Writing can be traced to a childbirth metaphor. As a fetus is created out of its mother's flesh and blood, so are the words created by the flesh and blood of their author. Alvarez's act of writing adheres to Showalter's gynocritical theory because it is the "psychodynamics of female activity" (88) that women understand. Since a man cannot give birth to an infant, he cannot possibly understand the pain and beauty associated with such a creation; neither can he understand her writing as a "giving birth" to her works.

While Alvarez does an exemplary role of illustrating how the female body represents the mother as nation with Patria, she also envisions how the female body is indirectly connected to power in political struggles. Trujillo had absolute control over his country

during his reign as dictator. Not only did he enjoy economic control over the island, but also had physical control of the people, his regard to the latter, he "usually" had his way sexually with any female on the island. His control over his nation is represented by his ardent desire to control female bodies. Thus, Trujillo's womanizing is an allegory of political control over his people.

The rebellious Minerva, the most resistance of the sisters, is the only sister who had to confront the sexual advances of Trujillo. Since the father, Enrique Mirabal, is a relatively wealthy landowner, he receives invitations to attend government functions, which Trujillo often attends. Enrique Mirabal would invite friends and his daughters to these social events. At one of these functions, Minerva catches Trujillo's attention, but resists the dictator's advances. Minerva here uses her body as a site of political resistance. Various times in the novel, Trujillo attempts to conquer and subdue Minerva, as he has so many Dominican women. Her resistance to his control, then, becomes both physical and political. Since Minerva does not succumb to the dictator like so many other Dominican women, he believes his only choice is to have her murdered. Minerva's body connects itself to the lives of citizens of the Dominican Republic. That is, her body like other Dominicans, is at more risk the more it opposes the will of the dictator, especially if done publicly. Ludmilla Jordanova illustrates how the non-restricted female body threatens authority: "women's bodies, and, by extension, female attributes, cannot be treated as fully public, something dangerous might happen" (92). In other words, females who flaunt their bodies are more vulnerable to overt acts of men. Minerva more than her other sisters strives for public presence. She expresses her opposition to gender restrictions after being released from prison, later being kept on house arrest: "All my life, I had been trying to get out of the house. Papa always complained that, of his four girls, I should have been the boy, born to cut loose. I couldn't stand the idea of being locked up in any one life" (257).

Minerva's body symbolizes the people Trujillo's dictatorship cannot control. At the same time the female body represents the depression and hopelessness that permeates the island. Due to Trujillo's stronghold on the island and his fear that evidence of human rights violations will be uncovered, Dominicans are not able to leave their country. While reading of Maria Teresa's imprisonment, and of the torture she is made to suffer in front of her husband, Leandro, the reader can feel the "hopelessness" of Dominicans. By persecuting the prisoners, the dictator sends out a message to others about his absolute control. This power is made real while Maria Teresa is tortured. She describes in detail her suffering:

Bug eye stood before me, holding a rod with a little switch. When he touched me with it, my whole body jumped with exquisite pain. I felt the spirit snapping loose, soaring above my body and looking down at the scene. I was about to float off in a haze of brightness when — cried out, I'll do it, I'll do it! (255-56)

The crossed out name "—" is her husband Leandro. Later, Maria Teresa is forced to watch the torture of her husband, Leandro. After witnessing the torment that her husband suffers, the baby she was carrying is "tortured" out of her while in the notorious cell "La 40": "I was screaming for them to stop. It felt like my very own stomach was being punched, and that's when the pains as bad as contractions began" (255). These "contractions" are not from labor

but rather from an aborted birth. Maria Teresa clarifies the reason for the aborted birth "I've either bled a baby or had a period. And no one had to do a thing about it after the SIM got me" (240).

Elaine Scarry describes the dynamics of torture by detailing the way in which the torture destroys the voice of the victim, and rendering the tortured nothing more than a body oblivious to all but its own pain. Through torture:

The pain so deepens that the coherence of complaint is displaced by the sounds anterior to learned language. The tendency of pain not simply to resist expression but to destroy the capacity for speech is in torture reenacted in overt, exaggerated form. Even where the torturers do not permanently eliminate the voice... they mime the work of pain by temporarily breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their words, making it cry out when they want it to cry, be silent when they want its silence. (72)

The translation of pain into power lies in this opposition between body and voice. The distance between the torturer and the victim is magnified and the former's power increased by his or her control over not only the body but also the voice of the victim. Thus, Maria Teresa's torturers not only have control over their own voices, but also over those around them. These torturers not only possess the power to speak, but an even greater power of eliminating language. The female voice cannot be heard because the torture is so painful. The only sounds the Maria Teresa can make are those "anterior to learned language," screams and moans. Language has been reduced to an animal state where Maria Teresa "was screaming for them to stop" (255). Pain, then, is the physical experience that is furthest from language and most closely aligned with silence.

Dedé, the surviving sister, experiences torment and pain unlike her sisters. Following the murders her sisters, Dedé has to go to the morgue to identify her sisters. While observing the bodies she realizes that they offer the testimonial their voices are no longer able to offer. She explains:

I didn't want to hear how they did it. I saw the marks on Minerva's throat; fingerprints sure as day on Mate's pale neck. They also clubbed them, I could see that when I went to cut her hair. They killed them good and dead. But I do not believe they violated my sisters, no. I checked as best I could. I think it is safe to say they acted like gentlemen murders in that way. (303)

The visual aspect of the dead bodies is stronger than words. The way the sisters were murdered and mutilated is one of the most compelling aspects of their story. The sight of the assassinated women presents a crucial moment of body politics. We can read the sisters' bodies as texts of personal and national history. She does not, in becoming involved in the revolutionary activities, endure the pain of being tortured as a political prisoner nor does she suffer the agony of being murdered. The pain she has to endure is that of losing members of

her immediate family and at the same time retelling these stories until death. In addition to the discomfort of retelling the stories, Dede suffers from breast cancer. She is diagnosed with this malady after the deaths of her sisters. As a result, she has one of her breasts amputated. Metaphorically, the breast can be looked at as a part of the female anatomy not taken by cancer but by the revolution. The missing breast symbolizes her dead sisters without whom she feels incomplete. She explains, "My hand worries the absence on my left side, a habitual gesture now. My pledge of allegiance, I call it, to all that is missing" (321). The laying of her hand over the missing breast is a "pledge of allegiance" to her sisters. Dede's mutilated body resonates with the sacrifices for revolution. Even those who survived it do not remain unaffected.

Another feature of the female body Alvarez incorporates in her novel is eroticism. Like gynecological changes, the eroticism in the novel is a vital resource for change and empowerment for women. American poet Audre Lorde has written in her book titled *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* about the "suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within [women's] lives," seeing it as the oppressor's attempt to "corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (1-2). This suppression certainly does not occur in *Butterflies*. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert both define erotic literature-in particular, in Latin American literature-as "works that are not only explicitly or implicitly sexual, but also intensely personal and intimate, and reflective of human sexuality in all its variations, heterosexuality and homosexuality, homoeroticism and autoeroticism" (27). Alvarez does not allow the oppressor to "corrupt or distort" these "sources of power within the culture of the oppressed" in which the Mirabals live.

The insertion of erotic writing in the novel gives female writers and characters a stronger voice through which they are more easily able to address their oppression. If they do not attempt to bring out this voice it will remain muted. Latin American writers are transgressing their culture's definition of the female role in that they do not allow themselves to be "defined, and subsequently confined, in a male context: daddy's girl, some guy's sister, girlfriend, wife, or mother" (ix). Two forms of erotic writing I would like to address in the novel are autoeroticism and homosexuality.

Cixous claims that writing is very closely linked to sexuality. She equates feminine writing with something just as sexually shocking to society-masturbation or "autoeroticism":

Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty - so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until next time. (876)

Cixous compares writing with masturbation, something secret and shameful for women. She suggests that writing provokes a shame for women. However, the feeling of

guilt only remains "until next time." Her suggestion is similar to that of Alvarez, whose writing suggests sexuality is shocking to society but should not be hidden. Patria comments on masturbation and her strong sexual appetite while at boarding school:

It came in the dark in the evil hours when the hands wake with a life of their own. They rambled over my growing body, they touched the plumping of my chest, the mound of my belly, and on down. I tried reining them in, but they broke loose, night after night.. .When those young men whose surnames had been appropriated for years by my mooning girlfriends came to the store and drummed their big hand on the counter, I wanted to take each finger in my mouth and feel their calluses with my tongue (47).

At this point in Patria's life, she has not become active as a revolutionary. Just as her pregnancies signal her birth into political activism, her initiation into sexuality parallels her becoming a member of the underground movement. In other words, Patria's insistence on owning her own body and her appropriation of her sexual pleasure for herself become an act of aggression against patriarchal society and the political situation of her country. Once again, we can say that the female body can be read as an allegory of political resistance. Alvarez's incorporation of masturbation can also be looked at as a "revolutionary eroticism." For "centuries of patriarchal and machista criteria have left deep roots regarding sexual attitudes in most Latin American countries" (Olmos and Paravinishini-Gebert, 31). Alvarez is going against the grain of traditional female literary practice.

Maybe the ultimate expression of the reappropriation of the female body, identity, and voice is a woman's choice to love another woman. Carla Trujillo asserts in the introduction to *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, that lesbian love and sexuality is an insult to the patriarchal system which has limited women's sexuality to their reproductive abilities:

Our own existence imposes a reclamation of what we're told is bad, wrong, or taboo, namely our own sexuality. Add to this the sexuality of other women, our lovers, and we become participants in a series of actions which are not only considered taboo but, by these very acts, give validation to the sexuality of another women as well. (x)

In this context, there are similarities between lesbians and Latin American writers. Both have transgressed their cultures' norms for female behavior, reappropriating and reinventing their sexual and cultural identity in the process of cultivating an independent, autonomous voice. Thus, lesbians do not necessarily hate men nor do they become lesbians as the result of sexual and/or physical abuse. Ana Castillo points this out: "If lesbianism were solely a reaction to male dominance or 'machismo,' the vast majority of women in this world would inevitably have become lesbians" (32). Lesbianism as seen in Alvarez's novel has the effect of strengthening female identity.

The lesbian scene in *Butterflies* takes place while Maria Teresa and Minerva are in prison. It is brief and not as graphic as Patria's masturbation scene. A female inmate named Magdalene approaches Maria Teresa after this inmate recounts the reason she is in prison. Maria Teresa describes the meeting:

She came forward like she was going to tell me a secret and brushed her lips to mine. I pulled back, shocked. *Ah*, Magdalena, I said, I'm not *that way*, you know. She laughed. Girl, I don't know what you mean by *thatway*, like it's a wrong turn or something. My body happens to also love the people my heart loves. It made sense the way she said that. I wanted her knee touching my knee not to mean anything, but it did. (249) [Emphasis with the Italics is the author's]

Clearly, the author's intention in describing this scene is not to show that Maria Teresa had lesbian tendencies but instead demonstrate a women-centeredness when Magdalene says, "My body happens to also love the people my heart loves" (250). By acknowledging their lesbianism, women are asserting that they will not be submissive to men. In short, the lesbianism as portrayed in the novel is not just sexual but is a matter of resistance to patriarchy. Julia Alvarez's focus on the culture in the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean demonstrates the problematic status of women's bodies and the relation of those bodies to both language and society. The female body has been defined by male standards. Alvarez strives to define the female body on her own terms. She does not claim there is a single way to define the body. While writing about the female body as subject, Alvarez acknowledges that she is writing with a feminine language. The writer realizes that as long as a woman remains an object, she is unable to act, unable to speak. Her female characters have a voice since they are no longer represented as objects.

Notes

[1] I want to clarify in Alvarez's "writing the body," her thought and feelings are those of a woman whereas "writing the body" was once only achieved through male discourse. When female writers "write the body" the body takes the role of a subject instead of an object. On a similar note, "body politic" provides the knowledge and power behind the female voice. "Writing the body" in *Butterflies* is connected to revolution and resistance told through a female voice while the "body politic" refers to tools and weapons relating to the female body such as menstruation and pregnancy.

Bibliography

- Alvarez, Julia. In the Time of the Butterflies. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1994.
- Castillo, Ana. "La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self." Ed. Carla Trujillo. Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warnes Us About. Berkley: Third Women P, 1991.
- Cixous, Helen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New York: Rutgers UP, 1993.
- Dworkin, Andrea. Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- Fernández Olmos, Margarite. "Sexual Politics and the Latina writer" Eds. Harold Augenbraum, Terry Quinn Ilan Stavans. Bendíceme América: Latino Writers of the United States. New York: Publication of the Mercantile Library of New York, 1993.
- Fernández Olmos, Margarite and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. Eds. Pleasure in the Word: Erotic Writings by Latin American Women. New York: White Wine Press, 1993.
- Fernando Valerio, Holquin. "En el tiempo de las mariposas de Julio Alvarez: una reinterpretación de la historia". Chasqui 27 (1998): 92-102.
- Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Jordanova, Judmilla. Sexual Visions. London: Harrester, 1989.

- Kaminsky, Amy K. Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1993.
- King, Debra Walter. "Writing in Red Ink." Body Politics and the Fictional Double. Ed. Debra Walter King. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Sisters/Outsider. Freedom, CA: Crossings P, 1984.
- Martin, Emily. The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction. Boston: Beacon P, 1987.
- Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Critical Inquiry. 8 (1981): 179-205.
- Trujillo, Carla, Ed. Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About. Berkley: Third Women P, 1991.