



Textuality by Daniel Cheung

Interview with Pilar Quintana Colombian writer and screenwriter

Interview by Tamanna T

Tamanna: OK! Hello. Thank you so much for being here and from our publication and from the World Literature team we're much obliged. Would you like to introduce yourself and your preferred pronouns if you want to tell them?

Pilar Quintana: Okay, I'm Pilar Quintana. I'm a writer and I'm she/her.

T: Beautiful OK! Let's get into the questions that I have over here. First of all, congratulations for the success of your novel, *La Perra* and also the translated version *The Bitch*. You tackle the intense theme in this novel of wanting a child and what happens when

you don't get what you want. How did you come up with the storyline of the novel? What inspired you to write it?

PQ: Well, I lived in Colombia's Pacific Coast for nine years and I think in the intensity of the life there showed me this story. At first, I thought I was going to do a crime story, but then I realized it was going to be a story about motherhood, and about a woman who really wanted to have kids, but she couldn't and that struggle. I have always liked *The Old Man and the Sea* very much and I think I wanted to do my own version of it with a woman as a protagonist, a woman against nature in the sea and in the jungle.

T: Yeah, I know this is a very relatable theme for a lot of people in the world which could contribute to its success as well. This is also your first novel to be translated from Spanish to English. Do you think that there was enough equivalency in the original text and the translated version? Do you think that everything kind of went over well, like came across beautifully and did you have any complaints at all or anything at all?

PQ: I think in translation it's always a new work. It's not a different book but it's a new work. And I think Lisa Dillman, the translator, I think she did an outstanding translation. When I first realized the novel was going to be translated, I was afraid of the language because it is very subtle in Spanish but it is there that the narrator of the book is not an educated woman from the city, but it's not either like a peasant or a person ignorant from, with no status at all yet but I wanted the translation to be able to translate that. I think she did it and I think that was the most difficult part, so I was really happy to do it and it's very interesting because for me as a writer it is difficult to read my own work yeah? I don't know if it's good bad.

T: Well it's definitely good!

PQ: Yeah but I cannot judge it.

T: Exactly.

PQ: It's like when you see your kid and you see he's beautiful yeah, it's the same kind of thing but when reading it in English, I liked it and I said oh this is a great novel! I can't believe I wrote this! Yeah so it allowed me to see my work with new eyes and that was wonderful.

T: I noticed that the language of the translated work used very simple language which made it more accessible for readers to read and get the gist of it. Is that what you wanted it to be portrayed as when you wanted to translate it because of the language barrier?

PQ: Yes exactly. Exactly that and I think that's how I write. I do not like ornaments in the language. I like it to be a simple language and I think Lisa Dillman got that perfectly.

T: An important point about the novel in the translated version, I wanted to discuss was the theme of Afro-Colombians and the slang that is used in the novel. When translated do you

feel that the translation did justice to the feelings you were wanting to invoke in the reader with the use of the language? For example with the slang language, do you think that whatever you wanted to portray was carried over?

PQ: I'm not sure. As in, I speak Spanish and I can speak English and I can read it, but I think I get a bit lost in translation sometimes, and there are some subtle things in the language that I don't get. So, I'm not sure I do get that in the language but what I found very interesting about that is that I realized from when Lisa was translating the novel, the novel does not tell you by itself that the character is a black woman. In Spanish no matter where you read it even if you're from Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, you realize she's a black woman. The novel doesn't say it, but you realize it because of the way she lives, how she speaks, her kind of life, you realize it but in English that was not evident. So, Lisa had to do some tricks to let the reader know she was a black woman and that I think she did also very, very good.

T: We could tell that that was Afro-Colombian slang being used and everything, so I think she did a

wonderful job with that as well. I will move on to the themes and imagery that you use in your novel. The dog imagery is a key Latin American theme that many authors have written about, especially in this past year apparently when I was doing some research where the dog is integral to the story. Street dogs represent abuse, poverty, female violence, and especially in the case of *The Bitch* as we have seen. Why was it important for you to inculcate Chirli into the story? Because it was a big shock to us as North Americans because we treat... well North Americans here, I'm not North American. They treat dogs like their family members like India also has a lot of street dogs so it's the similar kind of representation in India, so I just wanted to know what made it important for you to include the street dog in the story?

PQ: I think we didn't have many books about dogs in the past and I think our relationship with dogs and cats has changed dramatically. When I was still a kid, dogs and cats were not part of our families. They were animals that you used because you needed them to protect your home or to eat the mice, but that was it. They were fed and they would treat them mostly like things not like beings. And I think that changed

dramatically. When I went to live in the jungle the treatment of dogs and cats was different there and it was different because of the kind of life they live there. They live in an isolated area of the country, and they have no access to health care for themselves neither for the cats or the dogs. And the dogs sometimes are free there and they go wild. It's not the same when you have a dog and you have it in your apartment, he will behave good because he has no choice, but when I went there to live in the jungle, and I had a dog they became wild. So, I wanted to explore that. I wanted to explore the relationship between humans and their pets. And I wanted to explore the relationship of a woman who couldn't have kids and adopted a puppy as a kind of a replacement. What would happen there, and what would happen if this, if her daughter, her puppy did not obey and did not remain beside her as she wanted. And it's kind of like the call of the wild. The dog gets called by the wild, but the woman is also called by the wild.

T: Oh, that's so interesting! You mentioned the jungle. It was an intriguing aspect of the novel, how the jungle is depicted. When I was doing my research, I read that the jungle is a

strong force which can often swallow up the protagonist even. It is essential enough that it becomes a character in itself at times. So, what was the symbolism of the jungle in the novel?

PQ: I think the jungle is very important in the novel and it's not just where the novel is set, but it changes the characters. It changes the time, it changes the dog, it makes Rogelio who he is, so it's a strong force inside the novel. The novel happens as I said in an isolated area and that area is isolated because of the jungle and because of the scene, and it's a huge area but sometimes it feels like a jail, and the jail is made by the sea and the jungle. I think westerners, and I am both a westerner and not a westerner because I'm Latin American, and I think you as an Indian can understand that. But sometimes westerners feel like nature's wonderful and it's a happy place and that if you go to live in nature you live in harmony with nature, and when you actually go to live in nature and in a jungle you realize that in order to live in that you cannot live in harmony with nature, that you have to get your machete and be aggressive, to be able to live there. It's a constant fight between you and the jungle and that in order to survive there you have to be hard. So, I wanted also to portray

that. To define that idea of nature as a beautiful and lovely place which it is, but it's also horrible and difficult.

T: No I can agree to that and I've seen it first hand as well because I come from the north so there's so many jungles and lot of a lot of wildlife that you have to be hard hearted if you want to live there.

PQ: Exactly what I what I mean yeah exactly.

T: Another theme that I noted was the guilt and burden, and how it feels like a major factor in the novel. How did you tackle this issue in the novel and what led you to explore the theme of guilt and burden like in Rogelio and the main character and even with regards to Chirli and their relationship with themselves?

PQ: I've been exploring that a lot lately, thinking about guilt, and I think womanhood in Latin America and I think in our Hispanic tradition, womanhood is related with guilt. I've been reading a lot of Colombian writers from the past and I've been thinking and I'm reading in the works about guilt as well. Like I was reading a book, it's not a book, a play of [Emilia

Larosa] and it's about a woman that cannot have kids. She wants to have a kid but she can't and the husband leaves her but it's her fault. If your husband has another woman it's your fault. If you have husband leaves you it's your fault because you did not make his life happy and if you have a husband and there are no kids soon enough it's your fault even if it's his fault even if he's the one who has fertility problems. So so I think I was exploring in my own way into that, into a girl that is made to feel guilty because of a death that happened and it was not her fault but she grows up feeling guilty because they tell her it's your fault and she believes it. I think that's the case of many women, if not all women in our culture, we grow up feeling guilty for everything.

T: I'm sorry, when you were talking I was relating it to my own culture and it almost brought tears to my eyes because this is like a persistent problem even in India. Even if it's the man like that's infertile or there's some infertility problems it's always the woman that gets the blame. I think that's why I could relate more to the novel because it applies to my own culture as well.

PQ: I used to think, and I used to say until recently that it was because

of this culture of guilt. Women were made to feel guilty since we're born with original sin. We're born and we're guilty and we need to be purified in order to live our lives and there's that but I think women carry a bigger guilt because we're guilty for everything that happens. (Editors Note: We understand the problematic matter of this theme and recognize that bringing awareness to it, is a step towards healing.)

T: Yeah I think it's a woman thing more than it is like a cultural thing all across the globe which makes this novel even more relatable. I was looking through your recent novel *Los Abismos* and it also mentioned recurring theme surrounding motherhood and it automatically like invokes emotions from the reader and after writing *La Perra* did you automatically know that you wanted to write about the motherhood theme again because you just mentioned that you've been exploring it more or did it come more naturally to you when you were writing it?

PQ: I was writing something very different. I wanted to write a gothic story and the gothic story is still there. *Los Abismos* has a gothic part yeah but it's not a gothic novel. It's a novel about

motherhood and I did not realize when I started writing it that I was gonna write a novel about motherhood once again. I guess I have still still have a lot of reflections on that topic, yeah, since I became a mother when I was 43, it was such an important event in my life and that I think I need to talk about it, I need to process it. Because it's very complex, and because I was not giving the whole truth about it when I talked with my mother, my grandmothers, my aunts, about motherhood they say it's the best thing that happened to them and it's wonderful and it's what a woman needs to do because they become happy instantly and forever once their mothers and I became a mother, and that was a lie. It had some truth in it, but it was mostly a lie. So, I wanted to and needed to write about the things that I wasn't told. That women are not allowed to talk because they're not their seniors. If you talk about them they tell you, 'you're a bad mother'. If you talk about the challenges of motherhood even when you desire to have a kid even when you wanted motherhood if you talk about the challenges society tells you shouldn't say that those things.

T: You wanted to bring out the realism of motherhood throughout the novels that you've written.

PQ: Yeah, and I wanted to explore its complexities.

T: I think that's very important because it's not all happiness and roses it's the thorns that come with it too that people don't really like to think about.

PQ: Exactly yeah, I mean its not like you're a mother and you're always happy or always or always sad about it no it's like any other thing in life, yeah, you sometimes are happy you sometimes are not that happy yeah so, I wanted to talk about all of it.

T: The last question I have is about the epilogue which the double does not have so it ends on a shocking note of the dog being killed, my poor heart I love dogs. But the ending gives the story an edge that like kind of leaves the reader wanting more so I'm wondering if you would ever like even want to write an epilogue for the story and if you did what would that look like and if you don't obviously like because the story ends at a powerful note, but I was just wondering if you would want to write one?

PQ: No I wouldn't and I do this on purpose and I know some readers do not like it because they wanted definite

ending where they know exactly what happened and how everything went but I'm never going to do that in my stories well I should never say never because maybe one day I will, but for now I don't believe in writing definite endings because I think life does not have a definite ending not even death is a definite ending. It is for the person that dies but not for the people around the dead one. So I want that in my books I want the reader to be a bit frustrated and thinking well, it just went on and I don't know how. It's like the feeling you have every day in your life you just live and you don't know what's going to happen.

T: It's that empty feeling at the end. We we were like, oh I want to read more but I don't. There's there's nothing more to read.

PQ: Exactly. Then you have to think and perhaps that's what I want, yeah that the novel keeps living inside you and that you perhaps think about it.

T: I think that's a great point about being an accomplished author as well because I'm a literature major, and so many novels and sometimes the best ones are the ones that don't have a definitive ending that make you want

to think right at the end. You're sitting down and you're like "What did I just read?" or "What happened at the end?". It's that shock that kind of hits you and that's what happened with this book as well.

PQ: I think for Latin America readers that's especially difficult because we're used to watching soap operas and so the soap opera has a beautiful ending and you know the protagonists kiss and they're happy forever. Yeah, well in real life, we know that's not the ending. When they marry and kiss each other, there's another story starting there.

T: Yes, it is just the beginning. Those were all the questions that I had, but I did want to end by saying that I'm

actually waiting really badly for *Los Abismos* to be translated as well so I can read that because from what I got from the synopsis it's such a wonderful read. Do you have any plans to get it translated anytime soon?

PQ: Yeah it is being translated already yeah.

T: That's wonderful.

PQ: It will come out in in 2023, so it's still awhile.

T: I will wait that's all the questions that I had thank you so much for answering the questions.

Warp by Daniel Cheung

