



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(3), 1894-1898; 2021

Politics of Sexual Victimization and Empowerment in Mario Vargas Llosa's

The Green House

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APA Citation:

Vasuki, G., & Madhumidha Stri, G. (2021). Politics of Sexual Victimization and Empowerment in Mario Vargas Llosa's. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 1894-1898

Submission Date: 10/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 24/12/2021

Abstract

This paper focuses on how the female characters of Mario Vargas Llosa sexually victimised and how they empowered from the sexual exploitation in *The Green House*. *The Green House* is a stirring, complex novel inspired by a passionate commitment to social justice on the one hand and a desire to achieve literary quality on the other. Additionally, this study investigates the novel's excellent portrayal of a world in which gendered relationships between women and men, as well as traditional conceptions of female sexuality, are either re-inscribed or transformed in a patriarchal society. It aims to isolate women as prostitutes whose empowerment results in bodily, mental, and spiritual freedom, as well as a measure of subjectivity in their life decision-making processes.

Keywords: Victimization, Women, Prostitute, Sex, Exploitation, Empowerment.

1. Introduction

Mario Vargas Llosa is a prolific writer from twentieth-century Latin America whose works have captivated readers worldwide for their literary brilliance in crafting meticulous plotlines, their use of modernist literary techniques to create marvellous language, and their use of brilliant characters to depict Latin America's previously unknown socio-cultural scenario. The fundamental themes of his works include hypocrisy, corruption, and societal deterioration in Peru as a result of the country's regularly shifting dictatorships and bloodshed.

Sexual empowerment of women is just as critical to their development and well-being as it is to men's. Giving women the choice of sexual partners and sexual preferences, as well as the ability to use their sexuality according to their own wants, can result in their liberation and empowerment. Vargas Llosa establishes himself as the writer of the 'Boom' with the publication of *The Green House* in 1966. He also establishes himself as a writer of the twenty-first century with the publication of *The Green House*. As Raymond Leslie Williams, in *Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life of Writing*, writes: "Among the four writers of the Boom, nevertheless, Vargas Llosa is the youngest and the only one to establish an identity as a writer of the twenty-first century" (186). *The Green House* was first published in Spanish in 1966 under the title *La casa verde* and was translated into English in 1968. He garnered widespread

critical acclaim for this novel, with both a national and international public praising his literary scholarship.

The *Green House* is a novel that requires a high level of reader attention due to its complexity and fragmented presentation of a non-linear tale. The narrative follows thirty-four persons through five interconnected episodes set in Santa Maria de Nieva and Piura. In “A Small Whirlpool: Narrative Structure in *The Green House*,” Michael Moody, in remarking on the novel’s narrative structure, refers to an interview with Elena Poniatowska in which Vargas Llosa states,

These five stories occur over a period of forty-years. They are interwoven; they have characters in common and the structure is discontinuous as much in time as in space. In each episode of the novel, things occur that have taken place in different moments of those forty years. There is no linear order. I have tried to give all of these worlds - so opposite, so different - as a totality. (15)

While the presentation of *The Green House*’s story is non-linear, there is a general structure that provides a feeling of direction for the plotline to grow.

The novel begins with two nuns from a convent kidnapped two young indigenous girls from the Amazon jungle with the assistance of the military in order to “civilise” them and educate them in Christian values. Vargas Llosa’s stories are also true. In “The Source of *The Green House*: The Mythical Background of a Fabulous Novel,” Luys A. Diez writes in response to Vargas Llosa’s fusion of fiction and reality, “*The Green House* incorporates five impressions he had experienced at different times, between 1945 and 1958, and places as far apart as the city of Piura and the Amazon jungle” (36).

The novel’s description of the brothel, the “green-house,” is accurate. Vargas Llosa’s true memory is re-enacted at various times throughout the work. The “green-house” became Don Anselmo’s brothel, which was painted green throughout and piqued the interest of children who stole out to eavesdrop on visitors. After Don Anselmo’s brothel is destroyed, his daughter Chunga restores it to its former splendour, complete with an elderly and blind Anselmo playing the harp in his final days with the guitarist, the youthful Alejandro, and a powerful drummer named Jocko, an ex-truck driver.

In the following scene, the two nuns encounter Bonifacia, an abducted girl who, like the mission’s young girls, has grown up and assisted in the escape of a few Indian girls from the convent. Bonifacia seeks answers about her history in this episode and in subsequent conversations with the mission’s nuns after the girls depart. The plot then changes to the life of Fushia, a guy of Japanese ancestry and a lawbreaker who meanders through the Amazonian Basin’s rivers in search of his eventual destination in a leper colony with an elderly man named Aquilino.

Vargas Llosa’s critics have frequently observed that the novelist is more concerned with story structure than character development in *The Green House*. As Efrain Kristal and John King write,

For Vargas Llosa, plot is fundamental, and all of his narratives take the reader on a journey with an endpoint that often requires an epilogue on the significance of the concatenation of events ... Vargas Llosa thinks of his characters, not in terms of their lives as they unfold, but in terms of the circumstances in which situations are played out. (*The Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa*, 2-3)

This is not to argue that Vargas Llosa lacks brilliance in depicting powerful individuals in his novel; rather, it is the writer’s preference for the structure and narrative style of the story being presented.

Bonifacia and Lalita are the two most significant female characters in *The Green House*, as they determine the novel’s plot and storyline. She first appears in the story’s opening scene, as she is

interrogated by the nuns of the Santa Maria mission after assisting a group of indigenous teenage girls in escaping the mission. This opening scene is significant because it depicts the nature and character of Bonifacia, who is depicted as a gentle and meek young woman who has been sculpted and taught in the morality and principles of Christianity by the nuns. As a meek woman and devout Christian, this behaviour of Bonifacia can be interpreted as a defiance of the Church's and convent's norms. For Bonifacia and the other girls, life in the convent is similar to a routine workout carried out in a harsh and confined environment. From sunrise to dusk, kids are obliged to engage in a variety of activities in support of the objective.

From the beginning of the story, Bonifacia is depicted as possessing a "wild" and "carefree" nature akin to that of the "jungle" people. The forced teaching of Christian principles clashes with the innate traditional character of her "jungle" people; and the tribe's hidden and repressed nature is revealed in small doses even during her existence in the convent. Her most significant recollection is surreptitiously studying the Indian language from native girls, which provides as a link between her present existence at the convent and her past with the locals prior to her captivity. Her concealment is uncovered following the escape of the indigenous girls.

The clash of ideals transforms Bonifacia's existence in the town of Santa Maria and later in the city of Piura. She discovers for the first time the joy of sexual activity with a man during her stay with the Nieveses. Nieves and Lalita bring him to their home and confide in him their desire to marry Bonifacia off to Lituma. Bonifacia's life in the convent taught her to distrust males as "vipers" (*The Green House*, 131), a term she picked up from Christian teachings. As a result, when Lalita introduces her to Lituma, she quickly extends a politeness and exits the room. However, this fear gradually dissipates as Bonifacia discovers the pleasures of sexual interaction with Lituma.

As requested by Lalita, Lituma meets Bonifacia and attempts to force himself upon her in an emotional moment. At first, Bonifacia is taken aback by the deed and defends herself against Lituma's approaches. Despite Lituma's frantic attempts to copulate with her, Bonifacia maintains her virginity. However, this experience awakens a previously unseen sense of emotion in Bonifacia. Lituma notices Bonifacia standing with a gleam in her eyes after resigning from his failing show.

Though Bonifacia initially rejects Lituma's forced sexual act, she discovers a new source of pleasure in the act. This pleasure compels her to accept Lituma as a potential groom and to begin planning her own family, a plan that runs counter to the nuns' teachings. Additionally, Bonifacia's newfound optimism of marrying and establishing a new life with Lituma gives her a renewed sense of empowerment in life. After her first sexual contact with Lituma, she becomes less self-conscious in front of males and gradually develops an authoritative tone while expressing her feelings. Thus, Bonifacia's rejection of "celibacy" and the life of a "nun" and acceptance of a life with "men" is the first step toward physical, sexual, and financial emancipation. Bonifacia's life changes dramatically once more following her marriage to Lituma. Bonifacia is once again thrust into an unfamiliar atmosphere when she travels to the city of Piura. Bonifacia immediately captures the interest of Lituma's pals in Piura, particularly Josefino. Josefino is envious of Lituma because she married Bonifacia and has a sexual relationship with her.

Vargas Llosa portrays Bonifacia as a victim of sexual exploitation in a patriarchal 'machismo' society in *The Green House*. However, a close reading of the book reveals that, despite becoming a victim of 'machismo,' she eventually takes her own road to liberation from such exploitations and emerges as an empowered woman with complete control over her sexuality and identity. Bonifacia's first act of defiance against the imposed "civilization" on her uniqueness occurs when she refuses to wear her spouse Lituma's high-heeled shoes. After being humiliated and mocked by Lituma for her inability to walk correctly in the shoes, Bonifacia becomes enraged and removes her shoes, sitting defiantly in front of Lituma. This infuriates the spouse, who abuses her by beating her and referring to her as a "jungle savage." In response, she quietly endures the violence but defends her position in the face of Lituma's friend's assertion that: "In Santa Maria de Nieva the streets are different from here," Bonifacia said. "They're dirt, and it rains so much they're nothing but mud. High heels would sink in and women

wouldn't be able to walk" (307). This statement by Bonifacia demonstrates that she has a rationalistic outlook on life and is aware of the differences in the situations and reality of life in Piura and Santa Maria.

Another female character in the narrative who might be claimed to be sexually empowered is Lalita. Lalita, like Bonifacia, becomes a victim of male sexual exploitation; but, unlike Bonifacia, Lalita is unconcerned with her sexuality and does not judge female sexuality in terms of Christian moral norms. Lalita is depicted as a fun-loving, warm-hearted child from an early age. Lalita is an Iquitos native who has been purchased by Fushia to be his concubine from her mother. Fushia is forced to live as a fugitive from the law after her business operations with Julio Reategui in unlawfully exporting contraband rubber from Iquitos are discovered to the authorities. However, Julio Reategui escapes unscathed; and to exact revenge on the Governor, Fushia uses Lalita as a scapegoat, convincing him to swap his boat and some provisions in exchange for the girl. However, exchanging provisions for Lalita is a ruse for Fushia to betray Julio Reategui, as Fushia has been plotting Lalita's escape with him from the start.

Lalita is introduced as a fun-loving, outspoken girl, in contrast to Bonifacia's "meekness." Furthermore, in contrast to Bonifacia, Lalita's life is not governed by Christian morals. Thus, unlike Bonifacia, Lalita is not scared by the presence of men in her life and is unaware of her exploitation at the hands of men for an extended period of time. Though Fushia coerces Lalita into working as a prostitute for him, her love for the man compels her to accept the life of a fugitive with Fushia. However, the true conflicts between Fushia and Lalita begin when Fushia lands on a remote island in the jungle and refuses to relocate to Ecuador as promised.

Bonifacia and Lalita, two female characters in *The Green House*, are portrayed as victims of modernism and male sexual exploitation. Their victimisation and suffering at the hands of men stems from the man's inordinate insistence on the cultural construction of 'machismo.' As prostitutes and mistresses of several men, they are continuously subjected to abuse by their male lovers. Nonetheless, they refuse to be bowed down by society's exploitation and try to improve their lives by either being more forceful in their decision-making processes or fully avoiding an oppressive lifestyle that prevents them from becoming 'agents' of change in their lives. Thus, these two women are clearly vested with sexual empowerment as they succeed in making choices regarding their own sexuality and liberating themselves from using it according to their own dreams

2. Conclusion

In *The Green House*, Vargas Llosa describes a Peruvian society that is innately gendered, prejudiced on the basis of social class, and ruled by an utterly nasty and hypocritical political and cultural life. Within this cultural and social context, he creates female characters who not only reject the patriarchal culture's typical constructs, but also reject the gendered essence of a society that favours men over women. Thus, on the one hand, Bonifacia and Lalita resist masculine sexual exploitation of their sexuality by adopting and exerting their societally assigned status and place. The female characters achieve sexual emancipation, allowing them to define their unique personalities and demand respect in a male-dominated patriarchal society. They, influenced by the sexual energy, also represent a trend of emancipated women whose difference in a gendered society does not constitute an ultimate source of prejudice. Instead, they emerge as agents of change and liberation leading, if symbolically, to the empowerment of women in Latin America.

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