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IN A WOMAN'S KEY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF

FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN THE CARIBBEAN

(a translation of the second chapter and part of the third chapter from *En Clave de mujer: La*

*construcción de la subjetividad femenina en el Caribe,*

a dissertation by Doralba Linda Pérez Ibáñez)

by

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

### **Introduction**

Since my first day studying in the Graduate Program in Translation, I have been wondering what my thesis subject would be. I wanted it to be different, controversial, but most importantly, something that resonated with me; this task was easier said than done. The texts that I initially chose were discarded (mostly by myself) for various reasons. Some of the texts did not hold any academic value. Others were not challenging enough and there were texts that despite being challenging and academically valuable, I could not feel any sort of connection with them. While browsing through various databases, I stumbled upon several dissertations, which I skimmed through. However, when I read the words *En Clave de Mujer*, it immediately grasped my attention.

My first thought was that I was going to read a document about music, yet what I found was entirely different. First, it was not a text about music, but about literature. Second, as an avid reader with no background in literature at an academic level, this text resonated with me because it discussed many of my political concerns. I could not help but feel intrigued by the author's feminist approach while motivating the reader to explore Caribbean literature written by women. It was then that I decided that this text was going to be my thesis subject.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Doralba Linda Pérez Ibáñez was an associate lecturer at the University of Oregon before becoming the director of undergraduate research at ÚNICA - Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana in 2019. She possesses various degrees, including a

bachelor's degree in Spanish, Modern Languages and Education, a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, and another in Literature. However, it was thanks to her dissertation *En Clave de Mujer: La Construcción de la Subjetividad Femenina en el Caribe* that Pérez Ibáñez obtained her PhD in Philosophy which was presented to the Department of Romance Languages at the Graduate School of the University of Oregon in June 2019. In this project, Pérez Ibáñez studies the objectification that women endure in the Caribbean based on their corporeality as manifested in various literary characters. She uses five novels and one short story along with several essays from various authors to sustain her argument. The common factor that these narratives share is the suffering that their protagonists experience mostly due to entrenched patriarchal social structures.

### **About the Text**

My thesis is a translation of the second chapter and the first part of the third chapter of Pérez Ibáñez's dissertation. In my proposal, I mentioned that the second section of the third chapter was also going to be included in my translation. However, it had to be eliminated not only because it exceeded the required word count by a generous amount, but because its inclusion would make the text seem incomplete. I decided to begin my translation with the second chapter instead of the first because the first chapter was mainly an introduction of Pérez Ibáñez's text. It mentions the literary works that are going to be discussed but does not explore them in depth. On the other hand, the second chapter analyzes the short story and the first part of one of the novels.

Writing is a profession and an art that requires talent, determination and as Marvel Moreno says: "a good novel" in order to gain recognition. The publishing industry has been

saturated by male authors for many centuries. If one would approach a person with little to no interest in literature and ask them to name at least five women writers, that person might not be able to answer this question. They might even take longer to answer if we were to ask them to mention at least five Caribbean women writers. Until relatively recently, Caribbean literary works did not receive the same recognition as those by European or U.S. authors, and many have also not been translated into any other language. While some works written by non-English-speaking Caribbean writers do have English translations, there are also numerous works that have not been submitted to this process and therefore remain accessible only to those who are native or advanced in the knowledge of the language in which they were written.

For this reason, I chose this text as my thesis subject. This translation is meant to spark curiosity among non-Spanish speakers into exploring the world of Caribbean literature, particularly those novels and short stories that have an official translation. Pérez Ibáñez's text also promotes the works of women writers and most importantly, it creates awareness regarding the plight of women protagonists. It is no secret that women are expected to fulfill certain roles established by the patriarchy, and these roles or expectations can vary considerably based on the country, year, and political conditions in which they live. The Caribbean has generally been depicted as being the home to beautiful, exotic women who have been gifted with eternal joy because they live in paradise. Pérez Ibáñez's text debunks all these myths and exposes through fictional characters the reality that Caribbean women face on a daily basis.

In the second chapter, Pérez Ibáñez discusses medical discourse while analyzing the short story "The Youngest Doll" by the Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré, and the first

part of the novel *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* by the Colombian writer Marvel Moreno. The protagonists from these two stories are women whose bodies are abused and exploited by physicians, who at the same time happen to be their spouses. Another similarity that can be seen is that the states of both protagonists are referred to as the state of “dolls” symbolizing their lack of power and their fetishization in these narratives.

In “The Youngest Doll,” we learn about the old aunt, a woman whose life changes when a prawn embeds itself in her leg, and her doctor, instead of healing her as should be expected, takes the opportunity of turning the old aunt into a source of income that will pay for his son’s studies. Later in the story, once the doctor’s son has graduated, the old aunt is passed on to him as if she were an object. In addition, he marries the old aunt’s youngest niece who, at the end of the story, is forced to sit on a balcony like an object on display. In *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, we learn about Dora, a woman with a sensual beauty that alarms her mother. The solution that Dora’s mother finds for this problem is to marry off her daughter. Once Dora is married to Benito, the doctor of this story, he drugs her and mutilates her body until her spirit is broken and she succumbs to this abuse.

Pérez Ibáñez also addresses other key elements with these two stories such as the colonized minds in the Caribbean and the demonization of the region’s African heritage. All the aforementioned issues are still present in today’s society. From a young age, Caribbean women have been traditionally taught to be ashamed of their African heritage while venerating everything that is related to Europe or the United States. Curly hair is seen as something bad and ugly that must be straightened. Round hips and voluptuous bodies are often referred to as vulgar. Dora’s physical description is that of a woman whose African roots are dominant and in the story her mother attempts to tame these traits at all



costs. She would tie her daughter's hair in ribbons and bandage her chest so that it would seem smaller. Even today, mothers worry when they see that their daughters' bodies develop in a strikingly voluptuous manner.

The other subject that Pérez Ibáñez addresses in her work is how women, instead of fighting against oppression and abuse, accept it and normalize it. In traditional Caribbean society, once a female child is born, they are taught by other women that they must expect all the harm that will befall them because that is what it means to be a woman and they are frowned upon when they try to break the mold in which they are being trapped. The patriarchy has created a sadistic cycle where the only ones that can break it, are the ones encouraging it the most. Pérez Ibáñez mentions in her work that there are characters in these stories that fight said system. However, that will not be part of my translation.

The first part of the third chapter discusses political discourse. The two novels that are analyzed in this section are *I Gave You All I Had* (which is the published translation of Nadia Benabid) by the Cuban writer Zoé Valdés and *La Estrategia de Chochueca* [The Chochueca Strategy] by the Dominican writer Rita Indiana Hernández. These two stories are set during the regimes of Fidel Castro in Cuba and Rafael Trujillo in Dominican Republic, respectively. Due to the circumstances of their respective countries, the protagonists from these two stories are exposed to difficult situations that mostly target their sexualities.

## **Challenges**

As expected, there were numerous challenges that needed to be resolved during my translation process of *En Clave de Mujer*. It required a plethora of research both in literature

and history. Another important factor were the grammatical errors such as misspelling the names of several authors (as seen with Virginia Woolf, which was written as Virginia Wolf). There are also moments in which Pérez Ibáñez provides incorrect information (most of the presented quotes by Hélène Cixous are from the essay “The Newly Born Woman” while the source texts mentions that they are from “The Laugh of the Medusa”). This might be due to the fact that, since this is an unpublished dissertation, it was not submitted to editing for publication. Therefore, further research had to be done on my behalf in order to provide accurate information.

As a general observation, while searching for the English translations of the quotes used in this text, I realized that not all of them had a published translation and not all were properly cited. I have also changed the page number in which the quotes were found in order to match the documents that provided me with the excerpts’ translation. There was also the frequent obstacle of whether the colloquial term would remain in its native language or if I would find a translated equivalent that would present an accurate definition. The chapters that I selected for this translation contain a total of seven sections which I shall be discussing individually.

The first section, “Golden Cages: The Dehumanized Subjects and the Conquest of Writing,” begins with two quotes, the first one from “The Youngest Doll.” I encountered two translations for this story. The first translation, provided by Rosario Ferré and Diana Vélez, can be found in the Jstor platform. The second translation, a foreword by Jean Franco, can be purchased on Kindle. Although the differences between these two translations were not major, in the end I decided to use Jstor’s version because of the platform’s academic value. The second quote involves *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*.

This novel, unlike Ferré's story, does not have a translation of any kind. Therefore, every quote from this novel present in this dissertation is my original translation.

My first challenge was in the first chapter when I encountered the term "las señoras bien." Initially, I was going to leave this in the original language because I could not find a direct translation. However, its meaning was similar to a "fine lady." In the end of that same paragraph, Pérez Ibáñez mentions another work written by the same author, *Algo tan feo en la vida de una señora bien*. Just like *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, this text does not have a translation, yet on several websites that provided biographical information of the author, the title of this literary work was referred to as *Something so Ugly in the Life of a Fine Lady*. In the end I decided to translate the term in order to maintain consistency. On the other hand, *Papeles de Pandora* remained in Spanish because despite having some of its stories translated, like "The Youngest Doll," the collection title remains with no translation and "Pandora Papers" is a title that refers to a series of leaked documents from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. In the first footnote, the source text uses the noun "illness" as the subject of the sentence. I decided to specify that it was Moreno's illness, since this was her motivation to keep writing.

I would also like to mention that in the English version of "The Youngest Doll," which was translated by Rosario Ferré herself, the author translates the term *chágara* as prawn. This term is incorrect since these are two different crustaceans, and that by using "prawn," a sense of Puerto Rican identity is lost in the text. However, since this is the word that the author/translator has chosen for the official translation, I continue to use it for the rest of my translation.

Moving forward to the second section, “Marvel Moreno and Rosario Ferré: Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail,” I find my first challenge in the second paragraph. In the source text, the author uses the phrase: “en lo personal” to compare the lives and writing styles of Moreno and Ferré. However, since these two authors never met, I decided to translate said phrase as “on a biographical level” instead of taking the literal translation route and use “on a personal level.” I decided to choose this form instead to leave no questions whether these two authors had any interactions with each other or not.

I also encountered another quote that required my own translation. This was Luis O. Zayas’s quote where he uses the term “norteamericano,” which was translated as “American” instead of North American. The publication date of “The Writer’s Kitchen” was changed in order to match the publication date of the translated version of the article, 1986 being the year in which the English version was published. The author presents a quote from Sandra Palmer-López that also required my original translation, a process that had to be repeated with the following quote, taken from a work by Jacques Gilard. I also encountered another colloquial term, “cachaco.” Unlike “fine lady” I decided to leave this noun in its source language because it is a term exclusive to Colombia.

Another challenge that I encountered in this section was that I had to conduct further research on Moreno’s biography. The source text mentions specific situations in Moreno’s life that eventually lead to her career as a writer. In order to provide a correct vocabulary, I searched for a biography that was not only written in English, but that was also rich in information. For example, in the original text, Pérez Ibáñez mentions when Moreno was expelled from a convent school. My initial thought was to translate “escuela

católica” to Catholic school. However, not all Catholic schools are convent schools. It was thanks to this investigation that I could select the correct term.

This type of research is also repeated when Pérez Ibáñez discusses The Padilla Affair. As a phenomenon that had a great impact on the literary world, it was mandatory to properly find articles and news in English dealing with this topic in order to translate this text. When Pérez Ibáñez mentions Padilla’s “auto critica,” the English article referred to it as a self-confession. The articles also facilitated my translation when Padilla’s arrest was mentioned and the impact that it had on the rest of the world. In the original text, said response is referred to as a “reaction,” yet I decided to use the term “uproar” because it depicts more aggressiveness and passion toward the injustice that was taking place while a mere reaction can be interpreted as anything.

The first challenge that I encountered while translating the third section, “The Construction of the Female Subject,” was the first quote. In the source text, Pérez Ibáñez mentions that Foucault’s quote was taken from “The Microphysics of Power.” When I was researching the English translation, I found the quote in the article “Foucault on Power.” The second obstacle that I faced in this section was translating another fragment of *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*: “el matrimonio era la única salvación de la vida y la virginidad el único acceso al matrimonio.” As mentioned above, this novel has not been translated, and once more I had to create a translation that would match the novel’s style and tone. Pérez Ibáñez quotes Foucault by “referring to an individual who is cognizant of his own identity. However, since this text is about female subjectivity, I have decided to feminize the gender in order to maintain the focus on the female subject.

In the fourth section, “Golden Cages,” Pérez Ibáñez used various quotes from the book *This Sex Which is Not One* by Luce Irigaray, which is, in itself a translation of *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*. My research consisted of finding the document that contained the correct quote. In that same section, she discusses “The Youngest Doll” focusing on the old aunt’s character. There was a particular sentence that required more attention. It was about the “mercantilist transfer” that the old aunt experienced. Although one of the objectives of this dissertation was to depict how women are seen and treated as objects, I could not help but alter this sentence to “the old aunt is ceded as if she were a product.” This way the commodity view is still present while still acknowledging the old aunt as a human being, victim of the system.

The greatest challenge that I faced, overall, was translating the quotes from the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa.” This essay is one of Cixous’s most important works because it discusses the systematic oppression imposed on women by patriarchal figures. It is an essay that empowers women to use their bodies as a form of expression, to become individuals. It also expresses how these patriarchal figures influence the women who succumb to it, women who hate other women. All of these are topics that support the main points of Pérez Ibáñez dissertation. *La risa de la medusa. Ensayos sobre la escritura*, is a Spanish translation of various essays written by Cixous. When Pérez Ibáñez mentions the fate of the sleeping beauties, she failed to specify that the quote was originally from the “The Newly Born Woman,” an essay that was not available in English in digital format. Therefore, I had to physically purchase a copy of this text for me to acquire the official translation.

Another obstacle was the quote from “Familia, matrimonio y mujer: el discurso de la iglesia Católica en Barranquilla” by Dalín Miranda. This was another article that did not have a translation aside from the title. I also needed to do brief research on the Catholic Church in order to ensure a more accurate terminological usage. When discussing the characters from *En diciembre...* one of them is Abuela Jimena. I decided not to translate *abuela*. The story takes place in a Spanish-speaking country. Leaving the word in its original language is a way of reminding the reader of the setting in which the story takes place.

In the fifth section, “Race and Corporeality in the Caribbean,” Pérez Ibáñez analyzes the beauty standards of Caribbean women. She states the traits inherited from African roots are frowned upon while European traits are venerated. In this section, she uses the term “ario-masculino,” My first intention was to translate it as “Aryan male,” however, after researching its meaning, I decided that the most assertive nouns would be “white male” since Aryan is a somewhat antiquated racial term (also associated with Nazism), while “white male” is a term that is still used to this day and its weight in society remains intact.

Further on, Pérez Ibáñez discusses a section of *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, where she mentions Lina’s African traits and the reception that it receives. When mentioning the social views on the Black race, black is capitalized as opposed to white. This is because according to the Article “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” which was published in the New York times in 2020, it is mentioned that it is an “act of recognition and self-respect.” As opposed to the term “white,” black describes a race and a cultural group while the term white is not associated with a culture.

When translating the section in which Caribbean women are described according to the perspective of the outside world, it is said that Caribbean women possess “una sexualidad desbordante.” I needed to find wording that could properly express the presented idea. Hypersexuality was the initial term that I thought of using. However, this referred to sexual desire as an illness when the meaning that Pérez Ibáñez wanted to express was a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality to the point of exploiting it. I decided to research the different terms that are used to refer to women who are not afraid of exploring their sexuality and that is when I stumble upon the term “exuberant sexuality.” Women who are vocal about their enjoyment in sexual activity are often seen as possessors of some kind of disease. I wanted to use a term that would express the concept of a woman who enjoys her sex life not because she is ill, but because she is in control of it.

The next challenge that I need to solve was Luisa Hernández Angueira’s quote: “La revolución sexual de los sesenta, los grandes cambios experimentados en la esfera de la sexualidad y la familia...” While there were various articles that were similar to the idea that Hernández Angueira presented, there was no official translation. Therefore, this was another original translation on my behalf. Later in this section Pérez Ibáñez discusses the essay “La muerte de la acacia”: De la sexualidad y el poder.” The only thing that was translated from this essay was the first part of the title “The Death of the Acacia.” The rest of the title, as well as the essay was available only in Spanish. Since this is an incomplete translation, I decided to proceed as if this article had no translation to begin with.

The final issue that I faced while translating this section was when Pérez Ibáñez analyzes once more the old aunt’s predicament. In the source text, the expression that is used is “la chágara se encarga de despojarla de su belleza.” I had to be very meticulous



when translating this sentence because I did not wish to humanize a prawn. Instead, the sentence was translated to “she is immediately stripped of her beauty” after mentioning that the old aunt was attacked by a prawn. Thus, the consequences remain the same, and the prawn is treated as an animal with no malicious intent.

In the sixth section and final part of the second chapter, “Conclusions,” was one of the shortest and least challenging sections of my translation. The most significant challenge that I encountered was the Stephen Slemon quote. In the source text it is mentioned in Spanish and Pérez Ibáñez provides her own Spanish translation of said quote and provides the English quote in the footnotes I simply incorporated the quote presented in the footnote to the translated text.

The seventh and final section of my thesis is the first part of the third chapter of Pérez Ibáñez’s dissertation. “Chapter III Approximations of a Politically Committed Female Subject” begins with an explanation of the next novels that will be discussed. The first one is *I Gave You All I Had* by Zoé Valdés and the second one is *La estrategia de Chochueca* by Rita Indiana Hernández Sánchez, who shall be referred to as Rita Indiana in further mentions of this chapter due to this being the name with which she is most often associated. Because this chapter is not explored in depth, we are not provided with further biographical information about these two new authors. As the title of this section implies, Pérez Ibáñez discusses political discourse, and both Zoé Valdés and Rita Hernández are writers with perhaps controversial beliefs in this regard.

Zoé Valdés is well known for being anti-communist and for being against Fidel Castro’s regime. From the time she was young, her family would speak in their homes their disagreement with Castro’s government and warned their daughter not to speak of what

she hears at her home to anyone else. This was a shock to Zoé Valdés since she would mention that in school, she would hear the opposite. As opposed to her family's political views, the school portrayed Castro as a hero. The second and the most contemporary author, Rita Indiana, is, according to the newspaper *El País*, considered "one of the 100 most influential Latino personalities." She uses this power in her works by introducing controversial topics such as sexual and gender identity.

*La estrategia de Chochueca* is one of her most important literary works and it has not been translated, therefore I selected the translation of the title that was provided by a literary agency in Barcelona. The website also provided a translated synopsis of the novel yet the picture that is shown is of the Spanish cover. When *I Gave You All I Had* is being discussed, it is mentioned that it is written in "Habanero." I decided to not translate it as Havanan in order to maintain the cultural essence.

One of the footnotes explains the struggles that Cuba faced during the Special Period. One of these involved the ration booklets that were distributed among the Cuban population. Although information is provided when we search for this term, it is always seen as a second title. The Spanish name is always first. Therefore, I have left "libreta de abastecimiento" in the original language, however it is accompanied by its translation in parenthesis as a form of explicitation so that readers can easily associate this distribution system. Pérez Ibáñez provides a quote from Sonia Behar, which was extracted from the dissertation "La caída del hombre nuevo: Narrativa Cubana del Periodo Especial." This academic project that was written only in Spanish, and thus, I have provided an original translation. I repeated this with Néstor E. Rodríguez's quote.

The text proceeds to study the shortages that Cuba experienced through this event and one of these were the meat supplements. In the original text, it is referred to as “picadillo de soya” which made this research rather complex. Initially I was focused on the soy term. When there was a meat shortage during the Special Time Period, Cubans began to eat this protein, which had an unappetizing taste, as a substitute for the meat. At first, I was considering using the term meat supplement, but in the end, I decided to use “soy picadillo” in order to maintain the cultural authenticity.

Other challenges involved corrections to the source text. Pérez Ibáñez quotes the scholar Esther Whitfield in which she misspells the scholar’s name as well as Michel Foucault and Virginia Woolf’s. There is also a paragraph in which Pérez Ibáñez provides a list of themes that publishers believe to be important for a novel and there we will find two more challenges. The first one is the word “jinetera.” I initially wanted to leave it in its original language, yet it was later changed to sex tourism because “jinetera” is a slang term in Cuba and not a term that holds any cultural value. The second obstacle was translating “la cosa gay” which was translated to “gay identity.” If this were to be literally translated, it would have a derogatory connotation.

Further on it is seen that Pérez Ibáñez misplaced the quotation marks when citing “Special Period Fiction.” In the original text she closed the marks after “Period” and left “Fiction” with no marking whatsoever. A possible reason to why she did this might be because the full book title is *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and “Special Period” Fiction*. In this regard, Pérez Ibáñez would have quoted the title correctly, yet she did not provide the full title of the book. I have also included ellipsis points at the beginning of the quote

that Pérez Ibáñez cited in this paragraph. The style that she used makes the quote seem incomplete.

Pérez Ibáñez mentions in a footnote various literary works by different authors, the majority of which have no translation. Therefore, I had to research if I could find provisional English titles that the audience use to refer to a work (as the case *The Chochueca Strategy*) or if I had to provide an entirely original translation on my behalf (such as Nostalgia Coffee). Finally, another important obstacle that had to be corrected was when Pérez Ibáñez was discussing *La estrategia de Chochueca*, she mentions that this novel was published by Editorial Isla Verde. When I was researching whether this novel had been translated or not, I noticed that the cover also provided the name of the publishing house which was not Isla Verde, but Isla Negra.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Pérez Ibáñez's dissertation was an interesting text to translate. Not only does it analyze themes that are still relevant today, but from a literary standpoint, specifically literature written by women from the Caribbean. At first glance, this text may seem relatively straightforward, however the amount of research that had to be conducted in order to properly translate these two chapters was extensive. I had to research historical events and verify which were the texts that required my own translation, and which were the ones that already had one. I also had to choose which translation was more suitable for this project when a text had more than one as seen with "The Youngest Doll." Translating the quotes from *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* was one of the most difficult parts for

me. I had to be very careful with the wording so that the language in the quotes would feel genuine.

This project has made me cherish even more the hard work and dedication that translators put into their work: Research, correct wording, and how even a single word can require a generous amount of study in order to provide the appropriate meaning in the target language. Nonetheless, I am grateful for having chosen such a challenging text for my thesis.

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