

*Poetic Song in a Cappella of Women Writers in Peru from 1900 to 1960*

**Lady Rojas Benavente**

**A review presented by Ana María García Silva on July 25th, 2011 in Lima, Peru.**

It is an honour and greatly satisfying for me to present the book by Lady Rojas Benavente entitled *Poetic Song in a Cappella of Women Writers in Peru from 1900 to 1960*. As the title aptly suggests, the book offers an in-depth panorama of the courageous, audacious, rebellious, if not revolutionary, journey undertaken by Peruvian women in the literary arts. The book recognizes the historical contribution of art in general and literature, in its multiple forms, to the development of an authentic spirit, profound and independent, not only among women but within all segments who, for some unjust reason, have been or are, excluded from society. Artistic space belongs to the soul and the soul does not conform to proscribed silence. The soul speaks, the soul writes and the soul (*alma* in Spanish) is strictly-speaking a feminine noun.

Many reflections occurred to me while reading this interesting book. Firstly, I was struck by the sheer effort of presenting meticulous and thorough research covering an extensive period of history, and condensing it in a manner that is agile and comprehensive without compromising the elegance and perfection of language customary in Lady Rojas Benavente's writing.

*Poetic Song in a Cappella of Women Writers in Peru from 1900 to 1960* is an extensive, thick and lively book. A profound work that reads like a novel, it combines historical accuracy with dazzling, revelatory anecdotes and includes descriptions and landscapes, almost like paintings, in which we encounter women with pens in their hands and surroundings so well sketched, we can easily reconstruct the scenarios in which these women move, love, encounter one another and write. The women speak to us through the words of the author, words that reflect her own, and her subjects', gentleness and strength.

There are so many merits to this work; I doubt that I can cover them all here. I discovered a text of such great depth, it can only have been the product of meticulous work, sufficiently rigorous and unwavering so as to cover, systematically, the history of Peruvian literature while gradually weaving the actions and words of Peruvian women into the exposition. Some writers are more well-known than others but the author approaches each one with the same interest, discussing

their texts with equal precision and bringing them to the foreground while firmly clearing up any confusion that can present itself in the categorization of 'Peruvian women writers'. Combining the themes of women and literature does not necessarily result in neat distinctions especially given the definitive period covered, i.e. women writers in Peru from 1900 to 1960. Sixty years in the history of the republic of Peru whose nation-builders, according to the testimony of the women writers, were predominantly men. Is there even a history of women nation-builders in Peru or does the male predominance result in hegemonies from which women must emerge? Lady Rojas writes of this emergence as a process that developed during those sixty years and that continues to this day. Reading her book is a moving experience, a hymn sung out loud for all of us, women and men. When we, as women writers or women, encounter ridicule or applause from our various platforms, some less celebrated than others, it is heartening to recognize that we are accompanied by other women, some far behind us and some still alive, whose words opened horizons, whose fight facilitated our path, however hard it seems to us today. As we rediscover their words, presented by Lady Rojas with agility and depth, we feel protected by their mantle of solidarity and courage.

I would also add that the author emphasizes the place that art in general and literature in particular occupies in our reality. Art, literature and poetry exist for the general public and yet their affirmation remains ambivalent. While the pleasure of reading poetry is recognized, it can be viewed with suspicion or fear and this ultimately limits the building of trust and knowledge. Such limitations are exacerbated by biased interests who would marginalize women and their writing, particularly when the writing goes beyond an aesthetic of language and plays a role as witness and agent of change in the social and political history of the country.

This leads me to a third reflection relating to that dichotomy of literature often highlighted and discussed. Literature can be viewed exclusively as a manifestation of an aesthetic or as an expression, not only metalinguistic, of language exposed and proposed. In the introduction to her book, the author presents a quote by Flora Tristán from *The emancipation of women*: 'Women, women writers and poets and artists / write to teach the people / and may the UNITY (WORKERS) be / the text of your songs.' This message by Flora Tristán could lead us to confuse the boundary of literature and its purely aesthetic role with literature that serves a purpose. In this case, a compromise seems justified by necessity. I understand that it was neither

the intention of Flora Tristán nor that of the author to delineate a specific path. It is simply about respecting the creative impulse as free and independent and the fundamental and urgent need to create a conception of artistic validity, as demonstrated by the works cited in the book. This aesthetic acquires its beauty in the truth of the discourse, the existential force of protest, the indignation of suffering, the angry denunciation of a wounded body that laments from the depth of its wounds, the pain made sure and beautiful by the certainty with which it protests. We are not talking about the falsetto voice of one becoming distressed. This is the voice of someone being beaten. The tone acquires the acuteness of that pain and unites into a single truth sung and lamented. All this allowed me to perceive the recent and distant history of women poets, narrators, writers who found in their words not the medium to offer their thoughts but their own identity as they endured the elements, the wind and tide and efforts to silence them. The woman emancipates her words. Is there any other way? No, because those words emerge from the narrowness of a body that encounters a hand, a mouth, a pen and having this medium, can claim her spirit and nurture it.

Another observation that arises in reading this interesting book is that during the journey through history, we see the profile of a spirit coming to life, one that is obstinately distinct from a masculine aesthetic. Perspective depends on point of view and this is particularly true when we're dealing with the early critical works of a genre dating from the seventies. One must recognize the work of the great José Carlos Mariátegui who, in his *Seven essays on the Peruvian reality*, affirms the existence of poetry written by women as a unique genre. But generally, there is an absence of material on women writers in the early twentieth century in most texts on Hispanic literature. This makes the work of Lady Rojas all the more worthy.

She clearly enunciates her objective in the introduction to her book. The purpose is '...to understand through literary criticism, reading and interpretation, a selection of essays and poetry by Peruvian women writers who published during the first six decades of the twentieth century and who contributed their vision to aesthetic work.' This criterion basically concerns itself with the aesthetics proposed in the texts of selected authors and the profession of faith that they manifested in literature as they established a dialogue with their readers on the condition of women and, importantly, brought it to life through their work as intellectuals and artists.

To achieve her objective, the author refers to the historical context in Peru from 1900 to 1960 and presents the theoretical framework of her study and reflection. She also provides an analysis of the texts of selected authors with special consideration for the various phases experienced by these writers as they transformed from 'subjects of society to subjects of themselves.' The second part of the research provides an exhaustive analysis of primary sources and allows the reader to understand poetic notions within the cultural context of Peru. The third part provides in-depth interviews with a subset of seven of the women writers and closes with a bibliography of the works of more than sixty poets presented in chronological order. This book is clearly the product of lengthy study, dedication, development and creation, constituting a major contribution to the study of Peruvian literature. Moreover, it comprehensively details sixty years in the literary, intellectual and artistic work of women who rose to the challenge of seeking their own space in a world that confined them. Lady Rojas Benavente comes to their rescue and places them in the limelight alongside renowned authors of Peruvian literature.

Finally, I wish to thank Lady Rojas Benavente for the opportunity of reading her work which proved a moving and intellectual experience. I would recommend to all those present that they too enjoy the gift of reading this masterly work.

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N.B: Launching of a book, during the 16<sup>th</sup> Book fair in Lima: July 20- August 2, 2011

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Translated by Cora Siré