## Reinaldo Arenas:
## Transgression and Otherness of Female Identity

***Enrique Morales-Díaz***

By adopting a variety of specific central characters in his novels, short stories, poems and play, Reinaldo Arenas became a dissident in the eyes of the Cuban regime, and thus a counterrevolutionary attempting to interrupt the process of building and maintaining a socialist government in Cuba. Consequently, Arenas' literary personas became archetypal figures of the Cuba that Castro perceived as oppositional to the development of a revolutionary social consciousness. The use and representation of the homosexual, as well as the relationship between mother and child in his writing, infused his desire to "re-write" his story, as well as that of others like himself who were perceived as a threat to revolutionary ideals. His depiction of these characters reflected not only his own personal experiences, but spoke to the condition under which the homosexual lived in Cuba.

Notwithstanding, the female characters represented in his writing are repressed as they reflect, based on Arenas' rendering, the circumstances experienced by the homosexual in the wake of the Marxist-Leninist regime on the island. As a result of censorship, oppression and persecution, the limited space for full exploration and discussion of sexuality imprisoned his freedom of expression and creativity. What the reader finds in terms of the presence of female characters is that their identity is often, shifting, and transforming. However, the shift is one from that of an abandoned woman to a female representation of the totalitarian government Arenas sought to oppose. The transformation that occurs in terms of femininity and identity not only parallels his particular status as a non-Cuban, but it will also transgress expected societal behavior regarding gender relations.

This "tactic" on the part of the Cuban writer stems from both the repression and stigmatization of male/female differentiation established primarily by a Spanish value system, which had designated specific roles for both men and women, introducing thereafter the concept of *machismo* as the basis for the development of contemporary Cuban society and reflected in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized subject. Thus, by repressing the full spectrum of female identity in his writing, which emulates Cuban society under a totalitarian regime, Arenas interrupts the re-production process identified by Stuart Hall in relation to a "post-colonial moment," and the interpretation of identity. Hall states that identity is always in transition, shifting as it is influenced and transformed by the environment and events that the individual both experiences and is a part of. This concept, also discussed by Madan Sarup (1996) asserts that there are two processes in terms of identity formation. The first he identifies as the "traditional view," by which a conservative mode of thinking establishes a fixed construct and inherent definition of identity. This view with regards to

Arenas' writing reflects Cuba's attitude and support of the established parameters of gender relations as dictated by the traditional Spanish value system, which itself derived from Moorish attitudes toward women, imposed via colonialism. The second view supports Hall's interpretation of the identity process. Sarup states that the contemporary, and thus post-colonial understanding of identity is: "fabricated, constructed, in process…" (14). Therefore, the machismo attitude that permeates in Cuban society determines the representation of both identity and femininity in terms of Arenas' writing, which then becomes a form of protest against repression and marginalization. The female characters portrayed in Arenas' writing will serve as conduits that will mirror and interpret the Cuban writer's message.

***Sexuality in Post-Revolutionary Cuban Society***

According to Tzvi Medin, when Fidel Castro declared in 1961 the inception of Marxist-Leninist ideology as part of the goals originally promoted by the Revolution, he established the parameters for a dichotomy that foregrounded the extrication of any form of middle ground. Thus, Medin states, the new "socialist" government adopted and promoted a "Manichean division of the world" (42). Medin postulates that:

> *Around the positive pole of Manichean axis are clustered Cuba, the Cuban Revolution, anti-imperialism, socialism, communism, the Soviet Union, the socialist bloc, the Third World, and humanity. At the negative pole are counterrevolutionaries, capitalism, imperialism and its local supporters, and the United States* (40).

At the same time the binary homogeneity/heterogeneity became common practice on the island. By deconstructing the status of one, the "Manichean axis" promoted an "exclusive self-image" of the "Other." Cuban social consciousness had to adopt the notion that everyone believe in the ideals their leaders were promoting. Hence, according to Medin, the stereotyping of everything that opposed the revolution promulgated the idea at home, "in its own camp," of the way things had to be (42). Within the new Cuban revolutionary social consciousness another dichotomy emerged which promoted the "angelic" perception of the Soviet Union and everything it represented versus the "satanized" image of the United States (which the United States itself did by labeling the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire"). To continue promoting and perpetuating this dichotomy, Marxist-Leninist ideology was introduced to the Cuban people: "by grafting it onto the images, symbols, values, and concepts of Cuban nationalism" (Medin 53). The association linking Cuban nationalism and the

Marxist-Leninist regime was the image of Fidel Castro as the "ultimate" patriot and nationalist, the "integrative symbol" (Medin 54), and as Pérez-Stable states, there was no: "claim on power independent of Fidel Castro" (63). Therefore, the promulgation of Fidel Castro as the "integrative symbol" of nationalism and thus, the justification for accepting a Marxist-Leninist ideology can be described as "internal colonialism."

Marxist-Leninist ideology in Cuba was promoted through what Medin describes as a Manichean view of the world where there are no "in-betweens," but instead the binary "good and evil" and any convergence from that norm creates the "gusano," the counterrevolutionary that must be expunged from among the masses so as to not corrupt the process of developing a homogenous social consciousness. The notion of "counterrevolutionaries" and the connection to capitalist/imperialist nations epitomizes the revolutionary government's contempt: "for anyone who is not on the side of the communist revolution" (Medin 40). According to Reinaldo Arenas' interpretation of the Cuban Revolution and its ideals, the promotion of "unifying" Cuban society came at the expense of marginalizing part of the population that already existed on the periphery, in an "underground" world that promoted a way of un-Cuban life by the time the revolutionaries took over the island in January 1959.

The "colonization" of homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuban society was reflected in the condition of women. According to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1989), in a patriarchal/phallogocentric society woman, and her "rise" in "status" was defined by her relationship to man which stems from the "first sex's" decision to permit a union through matrimony of the two (426). It is important to note that in Spanish American colonies, patriarchy served to enhance *machista* qualities that continue to exist in contemporary Latin American society. Women, then, become the "other" in the patriarchal order because there is a hierarchy between the sexes supported by – among other things – religious ideologies.

This idea is further discussed by Silvia Nagy-Zekmi's study of the parallelism between North African (Maghreb) and Latin American feminine narratives. She argues that the ideal role of women in Latin America stems from the concept of *marianismo*, the notion that women must rise to a status beyond that of the earthly pleasures connected to the sins of the flesh. Hence, the image of the Virgin Mary stands as the epitome of purity, virginity, motherhood and self-sacrifice. Nagy-Zekmi writes that: "El modelo mariano asigna la 'pureza' para la mujer que servirá de base a la praxis de la opresión masculina. Esta 'pureza' 'resulta ser la aspiración máxima en un sistema axiológico que posee como base fundamental la oposición de la Carne y el Espíritu" (88). She further explains that control over women is based on her reproductive capabilities and thus perpetuates man's monitoring over female sexual behavior (89). According to Smith and Padula, women in post-revolutionary Cuban society continued to exist within the traditional behavioral norms established by a patriarchal mentality during Spanish

colonization. Her treatment by her male counterpart will stem from the notion of *machismo* which Rafael L. Ramírez describes as masculine behavior based on the belief that men: "are categorized as beings who are aggressive, oppressive, narcissistic, insecure, loudmouthed, womanizers, massive drinkers, persons who have an uncontrollable sexual prowess, and who are…*parranderos de parranda larga*" (7).

Silvia Nagy-Zekmi's approach coincides with that of Smith and Padula as to the treatment of Cuban women: "…la fuente de la subordinación femenina en el ordenamiento patriarcal basado en dogmas religiosos, en los cuales se acentúa la relación jerárquica entre Dios y el hombre, y esta jerarquía se extiende a la relación entre el hombre y la mujer" (87). The established dichotomy between men and women identified as a colonization of one gender that believes itself superior to the "other," equally explains the colonized existence of the homosexual. Based on the idea of patriarchy and a *machista* attitude in Cuban society, homosexuals diverge from the traditional expectations regarding masculine behavior. Reinaldo Arenas defies that structuralization by writing to oppose not only the status of homosexuals on the island, but to write against the grain in order to deconstruct the established image of "dissidents" who do not accept the ideals nor promote the agenda of the revolution.

Arenas' and his "character's" marginalization, is both sexual and literary, matching Nagy-Zekmi's analysis pertaining to feminine narratives in Latin America and North Africa. Consequently, sexual orientation, its relationship to the "loss" of Cubanness, and an understanding of the concept of "machismo" is important because of its connection to the treatment of women, and by extension, homosexuals on the island. Lumsden writes: "Discrimination against homosexuals has also been bolstered by the *machista* devaluation of women" (51). To this statement Smith and Padula add that the question regarding the role of women in the Revolution comes under scrutiny if female qualities in homosexuals are seen as inferior. They assert that the traditional beliefs regarding female sexual behavior were equally reflected in Cuban society in the treatment, and hence the imprisonment of homosexuals (173). This sentiment with regards to homosexuality stems from the machista roots that permeate the island. Accordingly, Reinaldo Arenas' writing criticizes the nation as a whole due to its absorption by the government of its individuality. Carmelo Esterrich writes that one of Arenas' goals was not to reconstruct the nation, but instead focused:

> *…en la crítica de una nación absorbida por el Estado, una nación, en parte, estancada. Contra esto, Arenas propondrá una comunidad consciente de la imposibilidad comunitaria* (180).

Francisco Soto identifies Arenas' goals through Hector, the protagonist of *Otra vez el mar*. Soto states that: "Hector wishes to express 'his' truth, not 'a' or 'the' truth,

that someone…will receive. Hence, the realization that the work only comes into existence when it becomes the intimacy shared by the person who writes it and the person who reads it is revealed" (65). That is, Arenas sees his writing as an opportunity to surpass the obstacles presented by the revolutionary government, rejecting the expectations that those like him must neither be seen nor heard. This notion perpetuates a Cuban society dominated by a machista ideology, one in which men must behave in a certain manner, and with roots that can be traced to the Spanish, African and Catholic influence, described by Smith and Padula. In addition, Lumsden depicts that:

> *At the outset of the Cuban Revolution, machismo was deeply ingrained in the fabric of Cuban society. Gender roles were clearly identified and sharply differentiated. Men were expected to be strong, dominant, and sexually compulsive. Women were expected to be vulnerable and chaste* (55).

To this Mirta Mulhare de la Torre's argument adds that: "the dominant mode of behavior for *el macho*, the male, [was] the *sexual imperative*…A man's supercharged sexual physiology [placed] him on the brink of sexual desire at all times and at all places" (quoted in Lumsden 31). Evelyn P. Stevens categorizes societal attitudes toward women in terms of the traditionally accepted *marianista* role. According to Stevens, the characteristics imposed on women ranged from "semidivinity" to "spiritual strength" (9). The notion that women must accept their "lot" in life and perform self-sacrificing acts only reflects the machista belief and adoration of the "cult of virility" (4). It can be concluded then that a *macho* generally believes in the idea of being in control, acting rather than thinking first. Patriarchal societies must adhere and accept the role of men and their behavior, their domineering nature and "insatiable sexual appetite". In summary, a man is a real man based on his adaptation and performance of the established role: the man is always on "top", always in control of any and every situation. Therefore, because he possesses the "phallus," he names and labels. The phallus becomes the representation of the center, the representation of patriarchal law.

This phallus, which plays an important role in the enforcement of the machista mentality in Cuban society by establishing the "order of culture," according to Susan Bordo, is a "cultural icon which men are taught to aspire to" (94). The phallus, she states, must "rise to the occasion," thus sustaining Ilan Stavans' notion that in Hispanic cultures the phallus is associated with the crucifix and therefore with the gods and the heavens (91). She argues that: "The master body must signify an alliance with the gods rather than the masses, the heavens rather than the earth. He gazes outward and upward, undistracted, penetrating some higher truth" (91). The phallus, based on Bordo and Stavans' interpretation, is juxtaposed to a higher culture, a civilized world and not with nature (89). Rafael

L. Ramírez interprets the role of women in a patriarchal society in the following manner: "The woman is for pleasure, penetration, *para comérsela* (to be eaten). The macho seduces, conquers, and takes, and uses his sexual power in keeping with an old saying: *Yo suelto mi gallo, los demás que recojan sus gallinas*" (45). Bordo, Ramírez and Stavans argue, therefore, that the male is dominant, controlling and "just" because his acts are promoted and supported by the rest of society. Anything feminine is seen with negative connotations, or as Luce Irigaray states, "female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters," perpetuating the concept of a phallogocentric society (99). And in Lacan's analysis of the phallus, the notion of the "phallic stage" echoes the belief that because women are not the signifier they are judged by their "lack," and thus become the signified (285).

The idea presented up to this point is that man is at the center of the universe and everything and everyone else revolves around this belief. The penis (phallus) dominates, controls, "rips" women, and the homosexuals, must accept it and succumb to its power. In order for the homosexual to overcome this obstacle to claim his own existence, he must, as Arenas does, rewrite the self, re-discover that which has been taken away.

### *Otherness in Mother/Child Relationships*

Arenas' use of characters such as the "mother", the "child", the absent "father", and the dominating "grandparents" provide a parallelism not only to his personal life, but to the conflicts resulting from the Revolution. The "mother" figure is perhaps Arenas' most important character since she reflects the dichotomy that exist within him with regards to his role as a homosexual trying to exist in a revolutionary society. On the one hand, the mother represents that which has been colonized and then abandoned; thus, as an abandoned woman she is stigmatized since she will no longer be allowed to know the touch of a man. She is, therefore, destined to be alone, frustrated and resentful. Having been impregnated by the "colonizer," she will be left with a remembrance of his presence, and the result of his "colonization," (the child). The "child" is the outcome and a victim of this "colonization," utilizing as a means of escape the creation of imaginary worlds and characters only he can see and feel, as illustrated by Arenas in *Singing From the Well*. Yet, the presence of the father figure is always felt in the treatment the child receives from his mother. Hence, the colonized, the mother ("other") begins to look at the child with "envy" for he does not "feel" the colonization process as she has. Nevertheless, argues Roberto Fernández Retamar, the child, a form of hybridity, is representative of what Martí classifies as "our mestizo America" (4). This "adjective" utilized by José Martí describes the struggles for freedom present in Latin America, representative of: Athe distinctive sign of our culture – a culture of descendants, both ethnically and culturally speaking, of aborigines, Africans, and

Europeans" (4).

In Arenas' portrayal of the mother the Cuban writer feels both guilt as well as sadness. His feelings of guilt derive from his participation in sexual adventures that his mother will never again experience. Arenas makes references to this fact during a sexual encounter with one of his cousins: "While he was sticking it to me, I was thinking of my mother, and of all the things that during all those years she never did with a man, which I was doing right there in the bushes within earshot of her voice..." (*BNF* 12). The fact that the sexual encounter with his cousin takes place so close to his mother reinforces the notion that she is an "other;" she exists because the author reconstructs her in both his memories and his narration. According to Arenas, his mother has given up sexual/physical contact with men, or has been forced to by society, particularly because of the stigma placed on her as an abandoned woman. Arenas recounts how his mother was "marked" by her "failure" as a wife to keep her husband, and the chance that she would ever remarry was overshadowed by the fact that marriage, particularly in the Cuban countryside, was for young ladies and not for betrayed women. Thus, her identity as a wife has served to *deconstruct* her as a woman since she no longer meets the requirements established by De Beauvoir in terms of the reasons for the union of men and women.

The assurance by Arenas that his mother will no longer know the touch of a man is important because it underscores the betrayal perpetrated by her husband who left her with child and without the hope of his return. This abandonment, which Arenas does not speak of in great detail because he lacks knowledge regarding his parentage, leaves the reader to believe that a woman's existence is dependent on a man. One interpretation that evolves from the abandonment of Arenas' mother stems from the fact that the choices among female "companions" for men are numerous, particularly in a society where there existed an underground world rooted in gambling, drugs and prostitution. According to De Beauvoir, the "husband" has both the option and the opportunity to be selective. She states that: "since the sexual act is regarded as a *service* assigned to woman, on which are based the advantages conceded to her, it is logical to ignore her personal preferences" (435). The fact that she "served" her husband sexually, which De Beauvoir states in the second reason for marriage, and has provided him with a child, hence the first reason, stipulates that she is no longer important in her husband's life since she has fulfilled her "physiological destiny" (484). This condition, which Arenas' mother has endured, has been discussed by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her poem, "In a Lighter Vein" where she deconstructs the seventeenth century gender dichotomy established by Spanish patriarchal society. Her argument centers on the idea that the male gaze has instituted extreme behaviors and categorizations that make it impossible for women to "please" men. The victimization of women by their opposites is rooted,

according to Sor Juana, in the notion that this dichotomy subjugates and represses women.

The sadness that Reinaldo Arenas alludes to with regards to his mother is also echoed in the description he provides as he is being reprimanded. One of the important aspects of this description by the Cuban writer stems from the parallelism that he makes between the "good mother" he dreams about and the "evil mother" he has heard people describe. The second description of the mother, which stems from commentaries made by family members and neighbors will reappear in *Old Rosa* and *The Assault*. In both novels the mother will have adopted masculine-associated characteristics that have repressed any sign of femininity. Instead, the mother/female figure in Arenas' *oeuvre* becomes synonymous with repression itself. In *Singing From the Well,* as the narrator's mother is standing over him like a "tree," Arenas' relationship to her, and to all female characters that are present in his writing, will be established: while she is the center of his world, it is her "failure" as a woman, as a "wife" that explains the Cuban writer's relationship with both men and the female figures in his life. He writes:

> *As the cool feeling fills my whole throat I gradually realize that my mother isn't mean. I look at her, standing over me, and she looks like a giant, or like a great big huge crepe myrtle bush like the ones people tie animals to. Never noticing that the crepe myrtle is all dried up from so many reins and ropes being tied around it. My mother gets prettier and prettier and prettier. How beautiful …I love my mother and I know she's good and that she loves me.* I have never seen my mother. *But I always picture her like she is now* … (15 my emphasis).

Both the reference to the tree used by the peasants to tie animals and the fact that the writer admits to never having really seen his mother, describe her "disappearance" as well as her non-existence in a society that does not value failure to meet established behavioral norms *vis à vis* the prevalent gender dichotomy. This lack of identity at the same time reflects Arenas' own status in Cuba. According to Humberto López Cruz, Arenas/the child-narrator/Celestino blame the mother for their own suffering, for being the connection to the outside world that denies, oppresses and marginalizes his existence.

Therefore, the evolution of the male characters presented by Arenas will develop a sense of inferiority stemming from the negative relationship the child has had with his mother. As Michael Gurian argues (1994), the "emancipation" from the mother must occur in order for the child to develop into an adult. In Arenas' characters the rupture with the mother will enhance the abolition of her identity as a female since, as the child grows so do

patriarchal/masculine/heterosexual/repressive qualities that female figures adopt in his writing. Gurian states that:

> *Most of us grew up unfathered and overmothered. We got locked into relying on our mothers for our emotional bedrock; yet we must separate from our mothers to discover a male mode of feeling. It should come as no surprise that the vast majority of us come into adulthood confused, feeling defensive toward women's overwhelming affection, and feeling abandoned by men's lack of intimacy with us* (17).

Gurian's analysis correlates with Kessel Schwartz's assumption that Arenas' homoerotic writing centers on his fear of women, and it is his mother's failure in her established and expected role as a woman that sets the writer for repression and persecution. Schwartz states that:

> *Most of Arenas' scenes, instead of subtly shaded connotations, involve rather graphic descriptions of what appear to be common fantasies related to an inability to love women, who represent mother […] Also, one who has introjected mother, through that incorporation, reacts to male objects in the way she would* (13).

The concept of the colonized woman is a theme that is often present in Arenas' writing, just as the Revolution and homosexuality are encrusted in the inner self of his literature and his being. According to Alicia Rodríguez, the woman is but a reflection: "de la voluntad y querer masculinos" (152). In Arenas' novels, she is depicted as the repressed and marginalized/colonized subject in a *machista* society, where both the woman and the homosexual "are" submissive and passive participants in relationships with real men becoming subjugated characters. Rodríguez states that the women described by Arenas are: "mujeres rechazadas y reprimidas por la cultura dominante, así como lo es el poeta, quien participa [del] elemento femenino de la psiquis" (152). Thus, the female characters are a reflection of the writer, an invention of the subconscious that explains his existence or lack thereof as a homosexual in a *machista*/revolutionary society. This expression is described in his autobiography in the chapter titled "The Well" where Arenas expresses his feelings regarding the sight of his naked grandfather, a figure that in his writing represents Castro and his government. Arenas writes that his grandfather : "had a prominent penis but his testicles were exceptionally large and hairy [...] For a long time afterward I watched over my mother, in my imagination I saw her being possessed by him, and him raping her with his big penis and huge testicles. I wanted to do something to help her but could not" (*BNF* 13). For the young Arenas, his mother is again "colonized" by the grandfather

who is the epitome of machismo in both his behavior and the prominence of his member, and his jealousy cogitates the idea that it will always be impossible for him to openly express what his mother is able to because of her sexuality. As a woman, she is able to express openly her feelings toward men.

The mother as an obstruction for the author contrasts the female image in his writing with that of the: "aggressive, phallic, castrating one" (Schwartz 14). This identification of the "mother" with the image of the castrating woman encloses her in a "system of binary logic" (Robbins 169). Ruth Robbins, in her analysis of Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," reveals how a binary system establishes a hierarchical order which sets parameters that attempt to explain the superiority of one concept over another (169). In Arenas' description of the imaginary "encounter" between his mother and grandfather, the former represents the top of the hierarchy, oppressing and marginalizing the latter. Thus, the grandfather dominates the mother who in turn represses Arenas, the child. Consequently, the representation of the female/mother figures as an obstacle that reflects the behavior and relations between men and women by Cuban society.

The parallelism between the mother/female and Arenas has been treated by other Latin American writers, as is the case of images portrayed by Manuel Puig in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* using Molina as the vehicle that represents female identity. While the child narrator/Celestino and Arenas, in his autobiography, create imaginary worlds, populating the countryside with characters that only he can see and feel, Molina does the same through the re-telling of film plots. The parallel condition between Arenas and Puig can be seen in the use of daydreaming to escape a brutal reality and oppression, thus fantasy becomes the vehicle for freedom. There are various taboos that Puig describes in his narration, among them homosexuality, revolution and film culture (Tittler 47). Based on Tittler's analysis of Puig's objective, a connection can be made to what Arenas' goals are in his writing. Jonathan Tittler writes:

> *Crucial to Puig's strategy for counteracting Western culture's intolerance toward deviance from the "straight" norm is to portray the gay character of Molina as sympathetically complex. The window dresser's eye for the fine details of design, his sensitive identification with the heroines of the films he narrates, his genuine fondness for his mother and his cellmate, and his attempts…at defending himself intellectually against Valentin's cutting ratiocinations all help dispose the reader positively toward this middle-aged queen*…(48).

The homosexual theme will be important in the writing of both Latin American writers through the intertextuality, in the case of Molina, of the heroines in the movies he describes to Valentín. While the Cuban homosexual, particularly the

*loca*, sees his role as that of the woman, the passive participant, (as Ian Lumsden states there is a belief that there only exist two genders in any *machista* society), Molina sees himself as a woman, and describes himself as one: "Referring to himself as a female…he refuses to play a penetrative role in his sexual relations and cannot imagine enjoying sex with a man unless the pleasure is mixed with pain and fear" (Tittler 48). For Molina, his role entails being afraid of men, as every woman is "supposed" to, but Arenas' homosexual will accept the role of the passive sexual participant only as the mood deems it necessary. He believes this and describes it in his writing when he discusses the fact that a *loca* does not seek another *loca* but *un hombre de verdad*. As a result, the woman becomes controlled, manipulated and repressed by the *machista* society, reinforcing Arenas' connection to the mother/female figure. It will be in his last novel *The Assault* where the main character will try to kill his mother. This act by the character will symbolize a re-appropriation of the established male/female, hetero/homosexual dichotomy in Cuban society. As Juan Abreu states that the child-narrator has been transformed from a "mild mannered" creative child to a sinister "bird of prey." He had been distorted into an anxious monster that sought out his mother in order to kill her. For Abreu, the ultimate goal of *The Assault* is the extermination of the mother and everything that she represents since she is at fault for having brought him into the world that persecuted and enslaved (85).

The plot in *The Assault* is perhaps the most descriptive with regards to the connection between women and homosexuals in Cuban society. As a testament to his creative freedom Arenas has constructed a futuristic Cuba, much as he does in *The Color of Summer or The Gardens of Earthly Delights*. This futuristic Cuba is hopeless, just as the old woman states in *Persecución: cinco piezas de teatro experimental*, because all that do not conform to the revolutionary social consciousness must be annihilated. For the nameless narrator, the targets to be destroyed are his mother and homosexuals. The narrator's hostility toward his mother stems from his fear that he will become her. According to Francisco Soto, the narrator's "search and destroy" approach to dealing with his mother arises from a "castration fear/Oedipal desire" (*Reinaldo Arenas* 65). Arenas describes the narrator's fear of becoming his mother:

> *When I got home I looked at myself...But that was not what I was looking at. I was looking at my face. It was the same face, or almost the same, as hers ... My face was more and more my mother's face. I was coming to look more like her every day, and I still had not killed her ...I'm her, I'm her, and if I don't kill her soon I'll be exactly like her* (*The Assault* 2).

The depiction of the narrator's fear of becoming his mother, as Cuban macho society prescribes this female role to homosexuals, who in various works by

Reinaldo Arenas is synonymous with Cuban totalitarianism (as in *Singing From the Well*, *Old Rosa*, and *Farewell to the Sea*) and corresponds to a: "…crisis in the construction of viable gender relations" (Biron 7). As a consequence, Arenas' approach to his characters' relationship with their mother enhances the frustration felt by the homosexual under the Castro regime. The male character then focuses on the: "…erasure of women and its implication for prevailing images of masculinity" (Biron 7).

The acknowledgement that the image of the mother has been absent, that the narrator has not looked/seen her in a long time reflects society's non-acceptance of the non-conformist. Celestino/the child-narrator in *Singing From the Well* admits to not having seen his mother, and when he does he juxtaposes two images: the cruel and malevolent mother who curses his birth, what he symbolizes and always seeks to destroy him; and the sweet loving mother the narrator yearns for. The juxtaposing of these contradictory images re-enforces the concept of the "castrating woman," and as Schwartz notes:

> *To satisfy his belief in his own phallic power, the male protagonist…accepts the myth of female phallic worship (with a concomitant castration anxiety about the* vagina dentata*), a screen for his own real or imagined phallic deficiencies* (15).

The first depiction of the mother is also present in *Old Rosa* who tries to kill Arturo, her son, for being a homosexual. This mother, according to Soto: "…embodies the abusive characteristics of patriarchy…" (*Reinaldo Arenas* 80). This depiction contradicts, at the same time, what Arenas describes in *Before Night Falls*, where he relates that his mother's family attempted to instill in him a hatred for his father, and by implication, for patriarchal society in general. He writes: "I remember they taught me a song about a son who kills his father to avenge his abandoned mother. The song...relates the sufferings of a woman whose lover seduced her and vanished after getting her pregnant" (2), insinuating that his mother may have wanted to use him as an agent of her vengeance. However, Arenas, being a homosexual could not properly fulfill his role (as protector of women) because of the feminine characteristics prescribed by and attributed to homosexuals in Cuban ideology.

In both *Singing From the Well* and *Before Night Falls*, the mother is portrayed sometimes as a beautiful woman, other times as mean, uncaring, unfeeling and castrating. Nevertheless, she is a colonized subject, "una mujer 'abandonada'…" (an abandoned woman) who only knew the love of a man once and based on society's reception of her failure as a wife it is the phase of her life that defines her. The frustration created by the lost of that aspect of her life is reflected in Arenas' first novel where she often threatened to commit suicide: "There goes my mother, she just went running out the door. She was screaming

like a mad woman that she was going to jump down the well" (1). Her attitude and behavior are a reflection of the displacement she has felt by giving up any contact with another man for fear of being betrayed once more. She has developed an inferiority complex due to the contact with her "colonizer." As Dennis Walder states, the length of contact between the colonizer and the colonized is not as relevant as the "imprint" that is left behind (3). It is as though the mother wishes to transcend to a state in which she can live in imaginary worlds, a state thus escaping any previous transgressions she has suffered: "…for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settlers place" (Fanon 39). This attitude on the part of the mother is portrayed in Rosa's treatment and behavior toward both her husband and sons: she becomes the antithesis of matriarchy by adapting patriarchal qualities that include the repression and oppression of those around her that do not conform to her wishes and demands. In her relationship with her husband she gains control of the household by manipulating the one thing women can: her female sexuality. By adopting a cold and distant attitude with regards to her "conjugal duties" Rosa detaches control from the male and places it onto herself. Arenas states in *Old Rosa* that: "Little by little Pablo was losing his position as husband and man of the house" (10). Rosa, then, begins to display the characteristics that will lead to the eventual transformation of the maternal figure into the physical representation of the pain and suffering that the protagonist of *The Assault* must find and destroy.

The child, represented in Arenas' writing as the "outcome" of the sexual encounter between "the colonizer" and "the colonized," is looked upon with disgust and contempt. Though Walder tries to provide a simplified "definition" of the post-colonial, his interpretation does apply to the discussion thus far. He states that the understanding of the post-colonial requires an awareness of two important facts: "of the colonial inheritance [the child] as it continues to operate within a specific culture, community or country; and of the changing relations between these cultures, communities and countries in the modern world" (2). As a result of the relationship, or lack thereof, between the mother and the absent father, the child is rejected for s/he represents the freedom and sense of self that has been stolen, or is therefore lacking in the mother. Dennis Walder adds that: "the colonial experience persists [via the child] despite the withdrawal of political control [the father]" (3). It can be argued, then, that the child is representative of the "post-colonial" moment for s/he is what remains of the contact between the colonizer/colonized. Consequently, the narrator's goals are in conflict with the expected behavior of the child/son in *The Assault*.

Soto declares that in this last novel: "…the mother is presented as an uncompromising malevolent authoritarian force that ties down and makes demands on the nameless narrator" (*Reinaldo Arenas* 66). Therefore, he must kill her and what she represents before he becomes her and is destroyed by that conversion. However, by participating in the "Counter-Whispering" he has already

adopted the characteristics he abhors in his mother. The nameless narrator, while working to destroy the Re-president's opposition, becomes at the same time the antithesis of the totalitarianism he attempts to uphold. His statement at the beginning of the novel: "I looked at her. It had been a long time since I had seen her so close" (2) corresponds to his final act of destroying his mother whom he "hallucinates" is actually the Re-president. Through this act the narrator's repressed homosexuality, or true identity, representative of the non-conformist and of the author himself, overpowers and destroys the mother who incarnates repression and marginalization of any opposition to the revolutionary government. Rebecca Biron asserts that:

> *With* El asalto *Arenas explodes the values of revered motherhood and respect for authority. He portrays the rape and murder of the mother as the quintessential liberating gesture for a dehumanized island, for his protagonist, and for himself as author* (121).

Reinaldo Arenas' repression of female identity stems from the need to describe the circumstances surrounding the lack of existence of the homosexual in Castro's Cuba. The denial of femininity and the subsequent adaptation of masculine qualities by his female characters highlight his struggles as a "dissident writer" who sought freedom of expression, creativity and individuality. Ian Lumsden echoes Arenas' findings that in rural Cuba, while women's sexuality was repressed, males were free to partake in a variety of sexual adventures. That environment in which Reinaldo Arenas grew up also reflected the idea that was propagated throughout the rest of society: the active/male/"heterosexual" continued to be a "macho," designating roles such as passive/feminine/homosexual to a weaker and inferior state which Lumsden reiterates was also respected and valued (32). This notion established by Lumsden is also reflected in Silvia Nagy-Zekmi's diagram that stresses the expectations traditional patriarchal societies had for women and by extension homosexuals.

### *Conclusion*

Most of Arenas' characters, the marginalized, the victims that succumb to a greater power are portrayed by the author as they are seen by those in control: grotesque and disfigured beings; rodents, insects, cockroaches who do not deserve to live. In his discussion of the Orient, Ziauddin Sardar's comments parallel Fidel Castro's feelings toward these "gusanos," although Sardar's views differ from any of those focusing on the West's inherent interest on the Orient's "exoticism." Sardar writes that: "The representations of cultures and civilizations to the East of the West that Orientalism came to signify were based on constructed ignorance – that is, they were deliberately concocted and manufactured as

instruments to 'contain' and 'manage'…" (4). Among the images portrayed by Arenas and rejected and refuted by Castro is the homosexual. He is a being less than a man for taking on a woman's role; for not being able to pick up arms and fight for his country, because, as Castro states, he is too weak. All of these characters are often present in Arenas' writing as a criticism of Castro, the regime, and the Cuba that denies "his" existence. At the same time, it puts into question the homosexual's allegiance to his national identity: is a homosexual still a Cuban? Are women as Cuban as men? By attempting to answer this question, Reinaldo Arenas also attempts to re-appropriate the identity that revolutionary Cuba and its government has denied him. By placing him and keeping him on the periphery, the metropolis has restructured individual identity to symbolize the society in general, as Brad Epps states, the ideal behind the revolutionary agenda was to abandon the one for the good of the Revolution.

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