Análisis: En el Tiempo de las Mariposas

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In the film *In the Time of the Butterflies,* Minerva’s character portrays the complexity of women’s roles in the 20th century Dominican Republic. Minerva is the modernized, forward-thinking woman who demands to be educated in a field historically closed to women—the law. Minerva’s demand to challenge a patriarchal system is a counter narrative to the Western feminist binary which presents women of the South as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.” Antithetically, Western women from the North are depicted as “educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 22). In direct conflict with Minerva’s modernity, Trujillo regards women as mere objects. Minerva’s declaration that her body is not community property leads to Trujillo’s subsequent declaration of war against Minerva, a war that soon extends to her entire family. The ensuing battle between Trujillo and Minerva is intensified by Trujillo’s edict of women as *subjects* versus Minerva’s edict of women as *agents*. A beautiful woman under Trujillo’s gaze had few options: come willingly or by constraint.

Related to beauty standards, it was interesting to watch the progression of the Mariposas, and that of Minerva in particular. As seen with the Balkin Diva (Volčič & Erjavec, 2011) as well as Princess Salma (Ossman, 2011), a woman’s beauty is often a marketable commodity in media cultures. The film initially depicted the Mariposas as the most beautiful, polished, kempt, colorful, well-dressed and accessorized women of the Dominican. As the women took on more of an activist role, they became more physical in terms of the work that they performed. Their wardrobes became more virile as they wore blue collar-like uniforms as well as appearing in pants more often than skirts and dresses. The women began to wear their hair pulled back with little attention given to their appearance. And of course, there is the powerful scene of Minerva fighting for her sanity while she is incarcerated. All semblances of beauty and femininity are gone, as if symbolic of her having reached her lowest point. Just before the Mariposas are murdered, they return to the beautiful butterflies that we met upon the film´s debut. I am certain that seeing them as super feminine exotic beauties made them more relatable, identifiable, and more sympathetic to the viewers.

I thought the film did a spectacular job of showing that women can be just as effective as men when it comes to activist work (if not more so). It was intriguing to note how the Mariposas planned, organized, and executed their grassroots efforts within the community. In critique of the U.S. academy, Nagar and Swarr (2010) note the tendency to “present oneself as an individual academic star” which is “frequently in opposition to those who are seen as immersed in grounded struggle” (p. 2). Although Minerva and many of her organizers were scholars, you did not note the divide as expressed by Nagar and Swarr. Minerva and those alongside her went door to door and made personal contacts with the people. They used their resources to get the message out about the savageries of Trujillo. They sacrificed their livelihood and education for the cause. They stood side by side the men in the movement while lifting armory, digging trenches, and burying gun barrels. The Mariposas were later imprisoned, tortured, beaten, psychologically bruised, and ultimately murdered—just as their men.

Finally, male violence was prominent in the film. There was one scene that portrayed a school girl as violent when she attempted to fire her bow and arrow at Trujillo to avenge her family’s death, a precursor for the activist posture that Minerva would assume. But by and large, the film exhibited male violence. The guards, who tortured, brutalized, and murdered inmates and victims were all men. In contrast, there is a scene where a female guard smuggles in messages from the outside to Minerva as an act of benevolence. Mohanty (2003) contends, “Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies in order to understand and to organize effectively to change it” (p. 24). The male violence that is displayed in the film follows the patriarchal male-dominated patterns documented regarding Trujillo’s regime. For Trujillo to give women the power to abuse, he would be placing them on equal standing with men—an unconscionable act in Trujillo’s psyche. Women could never be trusted with brutality.

References

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