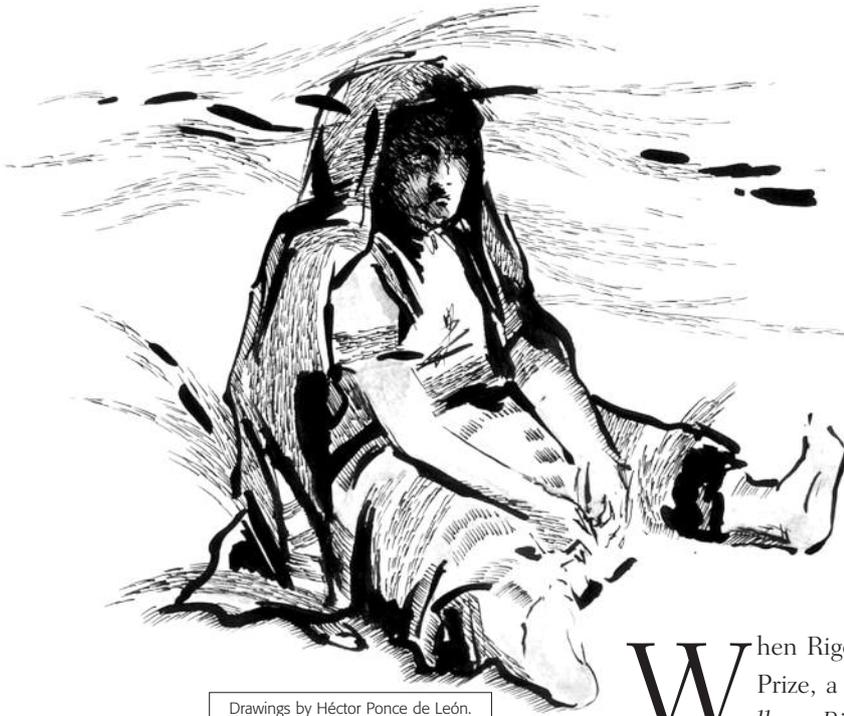


# A Place In The World

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León.

When Rigoberta Menchú won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, a lot of people got interested in her book *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (My Name Is Rigoberta Menchú and This Is How My Conscious-

ness Was Raised) (Siglo XXI: 1985). Many readers were surprised. Rigoberta presents us with an autobiography that does not fit into conventional Manichean stories about injustice. Her narrative about how she managed to survive in a hostile and xenophobic society and how she helped organize her community to resist the military attacks by the Guatemalan government is much more than a testimony. It reflects a whole philosophy of what being human is about (or should be about), regardless of cultural context. One tends to put the social or ethnic characteristics of an author above his or her works. First and foremost, Rigoberta's is a human, female voice that happens to be Mayan or Guatemalan —just as Mayans are human beings who happen to be Mayans.

This last statement may be rather obvious, but it does not seem that obvious when we look at the way most Mexicans behave toward our country's indigenous peoples. We either admire them blindly or totally ignore them, but we hardly make an effort to understand them, which is particularly awkward because their culture is so deeply related to ours. It is as if we were ashamed of our-

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selves. Very few Mexican fiction writers have approached this subject successfully when describing the problems and culture of indigenous in Mexico, but Rosario Castellanos is one who has.

Born in Mexico City in 1925, Castellanos grew up in Comitán, Chiapas. She returned to Mexico City when she was 16 years old and later earned her master's in philosophy from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1950. She worked at the Chiapas Science and Arts Institute and at the Indigenous Institute of San Cristóbal de las Casas and was Mexico's ambassador to Israel where she died in 1974. She wrote two novels *Balún-Canán* (The Nine Guardians) (1957) and *Oficio de Tinieblas* (Office of Tenebrae) (1964); three books of short stories *Ciudad Real* (City of Kings) (1960), *Los convidados de agosto* (The Guests of August) (1968) and *Álbum de Familia* (Family Album) (1971); several books of poetry, notably *Trayectoria del Polvo* (Dust Trail) (1948) and the anthology *Poesía no eres tú* (Poetry Is Not You) (1948-1971); two books of essays: *Mujer que sabe Latín* (A Woman Who Knows Latin) (1973) and *Sobre cultura femenina* (On Feminine Culture) (published posthumously in 2005).

Castellanos is an emblematic figure of twentieth-century Mexican literature. She is considered to be the first author to show that there is a feminine (not necessarily feminist) culture in Mexico. She did not need to rage against men in order to state and prove that women in Mexico were oppressed. As a major author in our culture, her defence of women came naturally. Her works are interesting and varied, with plenty of irony and witticism. The title of one of her books, *Mujer que sabe Latín* (A Woman Who Knows Latin), alludes to a saying we have in Mexico: "Mujer que sabe Latín ni tiene marido ni tiene buen fin" ("A woman who knows Latin will not get a husband nor will she come to a good end."). In this book, Castellanos talks about the artistic or scientific achievements of various remarkable women. *Poesía no eres*

Castellanos's works remain unique in Mexican literature. She managed to offer us a well-balanced social, aesthetic and philosophical view of literature.

*tú* (Poetry Is Not You) refers to a line by the Spanish poet G.A. Becquer that reads "¿Me preguntas qué es poesía? / Poesía eres tú" (Do you ask me what poetry is? / Poetry is you). "Poetry Is Not You" is a brief poem with a constant theme of Castellanos's poetic: otherness. "Because if you

existed / I would also have to exist. And that is a lie," she says in that poem, adding later, "The other: mediator, judge, balance / between opposites, witness, know in which is knotted what had been broken... The other. With the other / humanity, dialogue, poetry begin." To her, the other is our complement but also a potential Genesis of ourselves. It is only through others that we can assert our own place in the world. Our love, hope and misery begin or die in ourselves only in relation to others. Rosario Castellanos was conscious of the importance of looking at other people the way we look at ourselves and vice versa. In a thoroughly racist and plural society like Mexico's, this issue transcended the sphere of philosophy and poetry in Castellanos's works and occupied a solid place in her prose.

Her prose and particularly her short stories are not as widely read as her poetry, which is why I have chosen her first collection of stories, *Ciudad Real* to comment here. It is perhaps the one that is most representative of her style. In this book, she further explores the Mayan-indigenous perspective that she had already presented in her novel *Balún-Canán*. She did not like the term "indigenista" ("indigenist" or "nativist") being applied to her literature because she was not indigenous herself and because "indigenista" literature tended to regard Indians as exotic, good, victimized people. "This simplicity makes me laugh. The indigenous are human beings exactly like whites, but just placed in special, unfavourable circumstances," she said in an interview.<sup>1</sup> The world depicted in the stories of *Ciudad Real* —as San Cristóbal de las Casas was known— is a world of injustice, poverty and suffering but also of hope,

set in a city where Indians and mestizos are both portrayed as just and unjust people. The city itself reminds us of Rulfo's Comala in *Pedro Páramo* — it is a wasteland, a place in decline, where nonetheless many stories still take place.

Because the splendour of Ciudad Real was already a memory. The ruin first ate the entrails. People without audacity or initiative, paid by their glories, submerged in the contemplation of their past, let go of the sceptre of political power, abandoned the reins of the companies, closed the book of the intellectual disciplines. Fenced in by a tight ring of indigenous communities, deaf enemies, Ciudad Real always maintained a relationship presided over by injustice. Systematic pillage was countered by a latent state of protest that had culminated several times in cruel uprisings...Ciudad Real was no longer any more than a presumptuous, empty shell, a scarecrow effective only for the soul of the Indians, stubbornly cleaving terror.<sup>2</sup>

Riots, revolutions and injustice are inherent to Ciudad Real but in those events all social classes are equally responsible. In the story "La Tregua" (The Truce) the Indians turn out to be as ignorant and violent as the white people. Rodolfo López, an authority in the town of Chamula and the owner of a wine-shop, burns two Indians alive because they had been distilling alcohol without his permission. On the other hand, a group of indigenous torture and beat a white man to death because they think (or pretend to think) that he is the *pukuj*, a malign spirit disguised as a man.

Castellanos dissects the mentality of both mestizos and indigenous. Even though Indians are at a clear disadvantage, both groups share a lack of comprehension both of each other and of themselves. Castellanos describes the mentally stultifying effects of that situation. Ciudad Real reflects a far more complex world than we are used to reading in fiction related to Mexican Indians. Mestizos despise other mestizos as much as Mayans are unable to understand other Mayans. There is, for example, the story "Aceite Guapo" (Handsome Oil). Daniel, the main indigenous character, real-

izes one day that he is an old man. People start to shun him because old age is synonymous with decrepitude, death and bad luck.

Daniel was now like he had been at the beginning: empty-handed. But he had to admit he was old because other people's stern looks of suspicion, quick looks of alarm, heavy looks of disapproval proved it to him.

Daniel knew what those looks meant: he himself in times past had looked at others like that. They meant that if a man has been respected by death at such an age, it is because he has made a pact with the dark forces, because he has consented to becoming a spy and the executor of their intentions when they are evil...An old man is evil, and no one must approach him seeking compassion because it is useless. It is sufficient for him to sit on the side of the roads, in the door of his house, for whatever he looks upon to become untilled, a ruin, death...You must get away from him, avoid him; leave him to be consumed by hunger and need, lie in ambush in the shadows to put an end to his life with a machete blow, incite the multitude to stone him (p. 251).

Daniel tries to find a way to avoid death. As readers, we share his fear of being caught and then probably being killed with a machete, but soon we see that his tragedy is also an excellent motive for comedy. He thinks he can only be saved from death by the Holy Virgin. A big problem arises when he finds out that the Virgin only speaks Spanish. He is told that there is a kind of magic syrup, "aceite guapo" (handsome oil), that is supposed to make anyone who drinks it speak Spanish. Daniel has to find a way to raise the money to buy the syrup, which is only sold at white people's pharmacies. The same kind of naiveté is depicted among white people in "La rueda del hambriento" (The Wheel of the Hungry One).

Alicia Mendoza has a job as a nurse's assistant in Ciudad Real at an institution that is dedicated to helping Indians. She is expecting a prosperous new life there. What she finds, though, is a terrible place where the first hostility comes from

other people like her. Through various difficulties, she has to understand that neither Indians nor white people are true to themselves.

Castellanos's works remain unique in Mexican literature. She managed to offer us a well-balanced social, aesthetic and philosophical view of literature. Her poetry easily moves from love to metaphysics. Her essay *Sobre cultura femenina* (On Feminine Culture) and short story "Lección de cocina" (Cooking Lesson) deal directly with feminism without being dogmatic. Her two novels *Balún-Canán* and *Oficio de tinieblas* (Office of Tenebrae) are among the finest accounts of mid-twentieth-century social life in Chiapas. Some of her books available in English translations are *The Book of Lamentations* (Penguin: 1998), *Another Way to Be* (University of Georgia Press, 1990), *The Nine*

*Guardians. A Novel* (Balún Canán) (Readers International, 1992), *A Rosario Castellanos Reader: An Anthology of Her Poetry, Short Fiction, Essays and Drama* (Texas Pan American Series, University of Texas: 1998).

Reading Castellanos's works is highly rewarding. In her novels and short stories we find ourselves confronted with a different, distant and alien world. And yet it is not that alien. She is talking about us. ■■■

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Carballo, *Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Rosario Castellanos, *Obras completas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p. 238.



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