

# Feminism and the futile in the vine leaf



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In the early twentieth century vast social change was occurring across the country of Mexico. The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 and ultimately resulted in the introduction of a more democratic government that championed the people. But an aspect of this revolution that is often overlooked is the role of women. Women played a critical role in the revolution by fighting alongside men as well as providing medical care. This allowed women to occupy a higher status in society temporarily and they tried to leverage this to gain equal rights. But the majority of their reform efforts failed and after the war they were largely put back into their traditional domestic roles. The Vine Leaf by Maria Cristina Mena was written during the Mexican Revolution and can be seen as an allegory for the role women played during the war as well as a social commentary on society's resistance to change, specifically feminism, due to the dynamic tension between society and the oppressed.

While it is often overlooked, women played a crucial role in the Mexican Revolution. One of the most important roles women assumed was that of the Soldaderas. Soldaderas were female soldiers who often fought alongside the men. They also served as nurses, cooks, and essentially helped any way that they could. Many women also enlisted in order to replace their husbands if they died in battle. There was also a group called The Intellectuals who were comprised largely of upper class women who believed that through education, rather than fighting, they could reform the Mexican government. But these women weren't only fighting for the revolutionary cause, but for feminist ideas as well. Due to their significant contributions during the war they were temporarily placed in an elevated status in society. But after the

war this status was lost, women were forced back into their roles as “ ideal women” and many of the rights they fought for weren’t realized. Some of The Intellectuals did help write the new Mexican Constitution but weren’t officially recognized because they were women and most of the articles they proposed were never enacted. So although women were given more rights temporarily, ultimately they were put back into a marginalized position in Mexican society. During this revolutionary period Maria Cristina Mena wrote *The Vine Leaf* . Undoubtedly her writing was influenced by the historical context and can be seen as an allegory for women’s roles in the revolution.

She does this first by portraying the main character as a clear subversion of the “ ideal” or “ true” woman. One way she does this is by subverting Mulvian archetypes. Granted Mulvey’s essay *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema* analyzes film and not literature yet it is still highly applicable. The essay asserts that in films viewers are encouraged to identify with the male protagonist who casts his gaze on the female therefore objectifying them and making them passive sources of erotic contemplation. Mulvey calls this male gaze theory and examples of this idea are clearly present in the text. This is first seen when the doctor tells the story of his first patient who we later find out is the Marquesa. She comes to the doctor in order to get a birthmark removed but comes to him wearing a veil so that her identity is concealed. This means that she can cast her gaze upon the doctor while he is unable to do the same. The doctor also repeatedly asks her to take off the veil but she refuses.

The painting of the Marquesa which is described later in the story has the face blurred out and it’s suggested that the Marquesa is the one who blurred

it as well as the murderer of the painter. The painting of her is a nude and her blurring the face and murdering her objectifier is representative of her refusal to be objectified and put in a lower status due to her gender. Yet another way Mena portrays the Marquesa as a character who transcends gender roles is with the birthmark itself. In the story the doctor remarks on the birthmark saying “ With permission, I should say that the god Bacchus himself painted it here in the arch of this chaste back”. This is significant because Bacchus and the Greek equivalent god, Dionysus, were often portrayed as androgynous in their cultures.

On top of this he was seen as a subversive god who threatened order in society. This is partly due to the fact that Greek and Roman culture was undoubtedly very patriarchal and they were seen as threats to this. In the essay *The Iviad Rod: Gender and the Phallus in Dionysian Religion* it is stated “ The nature of his subversion is that he is fluidic, ambiguous and shape-shifting; he contains within one single potent figure many pairs of contrasting opposites held in dynamic tension”. How this relates to the Marquesa should be obvious. She, like Bacchus and Dionysus, is a character who is androgynous and consequently subversive. When she murders Andrade she simultaneously asserts her position as subversive and androgynous and continues this through her subversion of Mulvian archetypes. Also like Dionysus, her transgressions are also seen as threatening the order of society. Her murder of Andrade, which is symbolic of her denial of objectification, would cause her to be arrested and maybe even executed if she was caught. Its also worth noting that Mexican society at the

time, like Greek and Roman society, was very patriarchal and this is why they were seen as threatening.

But as we see in the beginning of the story, the Marquesa has the birthmark removed. The mark that symbolically and literally marked her as androgynous and subversive is erased. This is significant because it is through her removal of the mark that allows her to be an accepted member of society. At the end of the book she is married to the Marquese and is occupying a traditional female role as his wife. When the doctor sees the Marquesa unlike before he is able to cast his gaze upon her and as a result objectifies her when he says he has heard of her beauty but “ that tale has not been so well told”. The doctor also holds all the power in this situation because he knows that she is the murderer and could reveal this at any moment. This can all be seen as a parallel to what happened to women in the Mexican Revolution. Women engaging in war like the Soldaderas and occupying the political and academic sphere like The Intellectuals would have been considered taboo under normal circumstances but it was allowed due to the war. But once the revolution was over despite their best efforts they were right back where they started confined to feminine ideals like the Marquesa. The revolution ending can be seen as the equivalent of the Marquesa having their birthmark removed and with it their power to be subversive to the patriarchal society they occupied.

The fact that the Marquesa occupies a traditional feminine role at the end of the story seems to be Mena adopting a cynical view on social change specifically feminism. Even though the Marquesa attempts to undermine the patriarchy and is somewhat successful at first, she ultimately fails and her

actions seem meaningless. Mena is suggesting that true social change that is lasting is very rare and regardless of your actions it is often in vain. She also seems to suggest that one of the reasons is because being subversive is dangerous and can be alienating. When the Marquesa is subversive she is in danger of being arrested, possibly executed, and has no hope of living a normal life. Yet when she symbolically gives up her position as a destabilizing force in society she is allowed to re-enter and is no longer alienated. Women after the revolution faced a similar dilemma where they could continue to fight for equality but they would be put in danger and alienated. As a result they chose to once again occupy traditional feminine roles. Mena is asserting with this story that true change is rare due to the dynamic tension between society and the oppressed and their inability to exist outside of said society.

It is often said that no work of literature is created in a vacuum and *The Vine Leaf* is no exception. Mena was clearly influenced by the historical events happening at the time and incorporated this into her story. The actions and symbolism surrounding the Marquesa can be seen as an allegory for the roles women played in the Mexican Revolution, their elevated status that resulted, and how ultimately they were put back into their traditional female roles resulting in their marginalization. This allegory is Mena's attempt to express her cynical outlook on social change due to the dynamic tension that exists between marginalized groups and their oppressors as well as criticize this unfortunate reality.

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