

Love is Elemental: Legacies of Self-Destruction in “Why Women Burn”, by Helena María Viramontes

ROBERTO CANTÚ

The prose fiction of Helena María Viramontes has been praised for its formal experimentation in language, narrative structure and point of view, thus for techniques that distinguish a generation of writers who have been changing the way we read Chicano and Chicana literature.¹ The fusion of formal innovations and a feminist critique in Viramontes' narrative has achieved one of its most challenging stages in “Why Women Burn” (1989), a short story in which the reading emphasis subordinates the politics of identity in favor of a different kind of analysis, namely: the problematic of distant cultures currently influenced by analogous forms of modernization and development. In “Why Women Burn,” modernization is presented as global in scope, exemplified in the social conditioning of Rajput women in India and of Chicanas in the United States. The reading is, consequently, guided by concerns found at the core of a Chicana feminist critique, such as the analysis of cultural practices noted for their irreversible erosion under the impact of modernization; a declining tradition of liberal democracy and its politics of human rights in the wake of globalism; and the internalization of various forms of male/female self-destructiveness during eras of crisis and transition.

In what follows I propose the analysis of two levels of reading in “Why Women Burn”: the interpretive and the critical (or interdisciplinary). In the former, I stress questions of plot, narrative structure, and rhetorical features (e.g., metaphors of fire); in the latter, I identify and underscore the disciplines that function as “subtexts” of the story, such as history, philosophy, and politics. The textual

Roberto Cantú is a Professor of Chicano Studies at California State University in Los Angeles.

interpretation rests on the idea that literature is an art form that makes its own analytical and rhetorical demands on the reader. The object of the study, consequently, is to analyze how Viramontes *invents time* when she conjures up, as if from the netherworld of oppression, the voices and spirits of women in India and in East Los Angeles, therefore in unexpected connections and locations that have since become central to the novels of other Chicano and Chicana writers, such as Alfredo Véa and Montserrat Fontes, novelists whose work connects the distant and the near with similar designs: to understand a concrete situation through the interplay of its past history and its modern global affiliations.

1. THE TALE: ANECDOTAL ELEMENTS OF PLOT AND MYTH

The main plot elements of “Why Women Burn” are as follows: a Mexican American female is bewitched, as it were, by the beauty of her male counterpart in an initial situation that has all the romantic trappings of love at first sight. Both are college students and nineteen years old; after setting up household for five years, the heroine of the tale—who remains anonymous, hence with a symbolic universality—is abandoned by Javier, who travels to India on a spiritual journey after ransacking the soul and the bank account of his girlfriend. Living through days of confusion and mental anguish, the heroine decides to chase after her boyfriend in spite of her brother’s angry—although silent—stand: he is opposed to his sister’s rash resolve in favor of someone who clearly does not deserve her love.

But the heroine admits to being in love, so to India she travels, where she meets her friends Rajish and Saheeda, a former university exchange student and his wife, respectively; both agree to help her find Javier. Upon arrival, the heroine has marked herself with a red dot on her forehead as a symbol of marriage; conversely, Javier is somewhere in Pushkar Lake, with long hair his hair and eyes glazed with hashish, seeking a “marriage” of sorts with Brahma. The story thus suggests a mythic and thematic interplay of creation and (self)destruction that is alien to Chicana literature. Or so it seems.

The search begins on the route Dehli-Jaipur aboard a train to Rajasthan, followed by a car drive to Ajmer, the site of Pushkar Lake. While on the train, Saheeda informs the heroine that women in India burn according to the dictates of an ancient cultural practice: at the threshold of widowhood, women immolate themselves on their husband’s cremated remains. The heroine protests, thinking it insane for a woman to commit suicide. Upon arrival at Jaipur, the heroine learns that a Rajput woman has leapt to her death in the husband’s funeral pyre, thus becoming

sati: a saint. In a narrative passage that could be read as the heroine's epiphany, she glimpses her own condition "mirrored" in the Rajput woman, resulting in her resolve not to "burn" or destroy herself for Javier. Her brother Gregorio was right, after all: let the dead bury the dead. She ends the search, takes the red dot from her forehead, and tosses it out the window; the skies clear up and so does her mind. She returns home.

The heroine's journey is composed of easily identifiable folk-tale functions: a "family member" (Javier, in his role as common-law husband) goes on a distant journey; next, an interdiction (e.g., a brother's tacit advice against the heroine's journey to India) is transgressed in the form of a geographic voyage between two distant kingdoms (USA-India); the heroine then brands herself (the "red dot" concealing a common-law marriage); encounters the villain (personified in widow-burning customs), while the object of her love finds himself in a homologous condition: Javier is caught in a religious "spell," burning his life away, so to speak. Contrary to expectations, the villain is defeated when the object of the heroine's search—i.e., Javier—is *not* seized (note a further inversion of an important morphological element in the tale, with a female character now in the leading role and with a male character as the "captive" who is *not* rescued). Lastly, having achieved her own *illumination* (ironically, the purpose of Javier's spiritual journey), the heroine returns home, liberated from her "bewitchment" and from a self-destructive, romantic love.

2. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

"Why Women Burn" is composed of twelve unnumbered, non-sequential textual fragments, reminiscent of the compositional style that one finds in Juan Rulfo's short stories (e.g., "*El hombre*," "*¡Diles que no me maten!*," etc.), or in his novel *Pedro Páramo*, one of Viramontes' acknowledged totemic novels ("Nopalitos": 37). In "Why Women Burn," the twelve fragments fulfill their numerological symbolism in a female *rite of passage* associated with menstrual cycles and temporal thresholds, generally coded as *situational limits* in Viramontes' prose fiction.

The first person narrator organizes the tale in a complex temporal layering that consists of (1) a *remote past* (fragment 7, p. 182), corresponding to the time of the *relation's origin*, both in the sense of narration and inter-subjective love (fragment 1); (2) a *recent past* (fragments 2-6, 8-12); and (3) the *present*, corresponding to the locus of an interaction that reveals two features of the tale being told: the heroine has returned to the site of the "mistake" ("Back to the window... This is the window I first saw him from"), attempting to give an account of what she learned at the end of the

ordeal to an unidentified interlocutor (“See, it was me... And I didn’t know, I mean I really couldn’t tell you...,” frag. 7, p. 182).² As a result, the tale’s temporal “archaeology” could be structured according to tortuous, unsycatrical models conceived in novels by Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and, among other Latin American and Chicano writers, Alfredo Véa.³

| REMOTE PAST | RECENT PAST | THE PRESENT |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| fragment 7 (heroine, 7 years old) | frags. 1, 5, 3, 2, 4, 6, 8-12 (heroine, 19-24 years old) | The locus of the narration (heroine, after the “ordeal”) |

The narrative sequence includes a remote flashback that for the heroine should have been a *learning experience* (i.e., Tía Olivia, abandoned by an unidentified male, running after his car “like a desperate animal,” 182). The story seems to point, however, to the hopelessness of vicarious experience. Tía Olivia, consequently, is rediscovered 12 years later by the heroine as the “family” antecedent to her own story of “destructive” love.

The use of the present tense creates the illusion of lived experience, of temporal immediacy, thus obscuring on a first-reading the story’s dependence on memory and on a dialogical setting. For instance, after a distinction is established in the opening fragment between *the past* (the raw contents of a romantic “love at first sight” and its consequences) and *the present* (the “retelling” of the story), the second fragment unfolds along two temporal planes: the first conforms to a “relived” present, but potentially confused with the present of the narration (“At the Lodhi Hotel...I feel the heat....Now that I’m here, should I allow the comparison?,” 177, 179); the second, to a temporal plane that corresponds to an interpolated flashback, hence narrated in the past tense (“We met them, Javier and I, when Rajish was an exchange student...We had gone to listen to a group of Tibetan monks do their prayer chants on stage. *For whatever reason, I do not know*, Javier wanted to see them,” 178, my emphasis). On a close reading, however, one observes that the present tense in the first two fragments relate to different temporal planes, a difference that is blurred by the illusions of immediacy or of temporal simultaneity that constitute a cognitive backdrop in a story that could be divided into three phases: first, her *immaturity* (or “blindness,” thus producing an ironic reading of the story’s beginning, “a young woman with miserable eyesight”); secondly, her *life’s trials*; and lastly, her *maturation* (i.e., the heroine’s “pure vision”). Given that both the heroine and Javier are university students, one reaches an unexpected and somewhat perplexing conclusion: a journey

abroad might be more educational in its life-shaping and liberating impact than the books students read while enrolled in a university.

In sum, the layered structure of the text contains a *temporal* level, composed of flashbacks and framed in different modalities of the past and present, and a *spatial* level, constituted in the present by the “telling” of a story to an unidentified person: the tale of love is based on the travails associated with a history of Error and the freedom that stems from knowledge and self-mastery.

3. A RHETORIC OF FIRE

The dialogical setting in “Why Women Burn” places the narrative on the thematic tracks of a “homecoming” that is *spatial* (“This is the window I first saw him from,” frag. 1, p. 177), and *cognitive* (“My head has finally cleared like the skies,” frag. 11, p. 185), therefore suggesting the question of memory’s acts of retrieval as it functions through rhetorical mediations meant to produce a “representation” of a lived experience (*it all started here, I fell under a spell*, etc.). Congruent with an iconography of fire that ranges from purification to damnation, the rhetorical composition centers on the mapping of a journey to a symbolic underworld, followed by a homecoming that includes a return to the site of the “mistake.” This is the “origin” of the narration: the *telling* of the ordeal through a *testimonio* conveyed with an implicit educational purpose.

For example, the first encounter is marked by oddities and inversions that reveal the impossibility of what turns out to be a case of romantic love between two Mexican American university youths. The November chill weather and memories of a recent earthquake function as additional bad omens, foregrounding a *cosmic conflict* between heaven (the storm, monsoon weather, etc.) and earth (the recent tremor), hence suggesting a “disharmony” between the lovers to be:

...he was walking across the parking lot in sandals. And I thought, I thought as I saw him stepping the cracks, his hands dug deeply in his jeans pockets: what a pretty boy. His head bowed, he stared at his every step until he simply looked up at me. Like that... I immediately squeezed back into the concrete wall, my cockroach instinct to hide. He looked up at the window for no apparent reason other than perhaps, he had found it as I, an oddity, a mistake...looked up at the brooding density of the clouds: spotted someone with short croppy just woke up hair, a young woman with miserable eyesight and gold rim glasses, thick as pop bottle glass. He disappeared, went into the library and out of sight. (177)

The opening scene overturns gender conventions of the masculine and the feminine, emphasizing instead the contrast between a “pretty boy” and a woman with

“short croppy” hair and a “cockroach instinct to hide”; moreover, Javier appears as a *fractured male* through metonymy (“I saw him stepping the cracks,” suggesting proclivities toward fixation and neurosis), thus as a recurring male prototype in Viramontes’ narrative.⁴ Unlike the romantic tale where courtship plays a central role, the reader moves abruptly between the lover’s first “look” and the couple’s decision to establish a non-traditional union (“we set up household on the Eastside”). The fact that the opening fragment ends with a reference to Javier’s *disappearance* in a library, it would seem to prepare the reader for what follows: a young Chicano hippie who drops out of college, abandons his girlfriend and disappears in India.

Retelling the past in an interplay of memory and experience, the heroine wavers between precise description—a simulation of the omniscient voice—and moments of obvious dialogical anxiety (“Now that I’m here....Can I really feel the smoke wringing my lungs of breath, the flames disintegrating the flesh, bones glowing heat into mounds of gray ash? Can I?,” (frag. 2, p. 179). But being a flashback with an “experience-sharing” mission, the narrative’s rhetoric of fire constantly points to the heroine’s moment of “illumination,” a crossing of a threshold that leads to the awareness that she has been “burning” in a suicidal love. Interpreted as rhetorical signposts that guide our reading, the ironic references to multiple variants of *burning* gradually determine our reading of the text, unveiling in the process Viramontes’ method of literary production. For instance, in passages such as “I feel the heat” (frag. 2), “I want no part of this heat” (frag. 2), “I’m at the window too *incinerated* by my own grief to say goodbye” (frag. 3, p. 179, my emphasis), and, lastly, “the smell of burnt and wasted flesh” (frag. 6, p. 181), one can detect the beginning of a symbolic descent into Javier’s hell (with Saheeda as the heroine’s guide), and a thematization of the story through situational irony, sealed hermetically in the dual referentiality of the tacit question, *why women burn?*

Blazing with the fires of India’s ancient and recent history, the mythical demiurge appears in the guise of a locomotive, forged with the iconography of industrialization and colonialism: “The locomotive, black and red rust steel, takes on a new form, becomes alive with arms, legs, a thousand heads. Bellows fumes from its nostrils, pulls, cranks. Hisses” (frag. 6, p. 181). The black and red train to Rajasthan across a red desert traces the heroine’s journey toward a full realization of her abject condition, beginning with the image of conjugal love through the red dot on her forehead; followed by the witnessing in Jaipur of a child with a red face disappearing “among the bellows of a red dust” (frag. 8, p. 183); and culminating in the experience of a Rajput woman who, as the heroine discovers through Saheeda, has just become

sati by throwing herself on the husband's pyre. The chromatic symbolism of the color red adds an "imperial" dimension to the rhetoric of fire, particularly if we recall that the story concludes with the heroine aboard a plane where the steward is a man with "an English accent and reddish chaotic hair" (frag. 12, p. 186), therefore creating the chromatic association between an Indian custom (sati), the fantastic railroad-beast of British imperialism, and the historical allegorization of an unexpected double: a post-colonial India and a post-subaltern heroine. Shortly after learning of Saheeda's passive submission to a woman's fate ("In this world, *we* are born on a stairway leading to the pyre," frag. 10, pp. 184-185, my emphasis), the heroine suddenly borders on her own *cognitive* limits:

I cannot think of words to say. It is incomprehensible. In this world where the religious would prefer to die instead of slaughter a cow, they push women to burn. I look out the window....I can see the nylon sari in a blaze, a glob of fire and screams, an eternity in seconds. But this I'll keep to myself. It is wrong. Wrong. And I shake my head, look beyond the roadside stands, the puddles of water in the distance, and I stare until everything becomes a blur. (frag. 10, p. 185)

One is tempted to read this paragraph through the unifying theme of the heroine's *mental confusion*, beginning in a "tongue-tied" condition and concluding with the heroine's verbal incapacity. On the contrary, the conclusion—with its implied flow of tears ("I stare until everything becomes a blur") that cloud an instant of clairvoyance in the heroine's passage from crisis to illumination—carries the reader back to the initial *perplexity* ("I cannot think of words to say"), hence rewriting the paragraph as the record of (1) an *intuition* ("Something terrifying is about to happen," frag. 8, p. 183), followed by (2) a perplexing *utterance* ("In this world *we* are born on a stairway leading to the pyre," frag. 10, pp. 184-185, my emphasis), and (3) the "terrifying" *event*: the reported "saintly" act of the Rajput woman who commits suicide on her husband's funeral pyre.

The underlying discourses of the journey (e.g., self-immolation, rebirth, etc.) can thus be organized through motifs that emerge from the beginning of the narrative, such as the *window* and *sandals* (Javier's and Aunt Olivia's) but, most importantly, in the rhetoric of fire that achieves expression in five interconnected constructs: the landscape, funeral rites (e.g., cremation), cognition (e.g., the heroine's "flash of understanding"), chromatic symbolism, and romantic love. Written entirely in the past tense, the initial fragment establishes the window ("I am sure it was a mistake") and Javier's sandals ("That is what called my attention") as motifs that will be later associated both with a *view* of the world and *journeying* through the world.

The motif of the window turns into a narrative pattern that begins with the tale's "mistake" (frag. 1), later manifesting a heroine already abandoned by Javier ("I'm at the window too incinerated by my own grief to say goodbye," frag. 3, p. 179), then revealing Javier's window as a direct contrast to the heroine's ("he sat with the shades down, brilliant sun squaring the edges of the shade," frag. 5, p. 181), thus privileging a "worldly" life and demoting, as it were, Javier's "inner" life of suffering and intermittent hysteria ("so I permitted his mood shifts, his obliteration of the outside world...holding him from plunging too deeply into despair," frag. 5, p. 181). While on the train to Rajasthan, the heroine falls into a swoon-like state, foreshadowing her metaphorical death and eventual rebirth ("I wasn't aware I'd collapsed...I sit near the window," frag. 6, p. 182); the motif surfaces again in fragments 8, 10 and 11, where Ofelia looks through a window and sees people returning from a funeral and a widow-burning ceremony (p. 183). The heroine's liberation from socialization or cultural determinism is thus suggested through the thematic pattern of the window, concluding the sequence in (1) the heroine's moment of recognition ("I look out the window....look beyond...and stare until everything becomes a blur," 185), and (2) in her resolve to return home ("I took off my red dot...threw it out the window and told her I want to go home...I want no part of the burning," 185). For someone who admits to having "a miserable eyesight" (177), the reference to a blurred vision contains a degree of irony in the sense that it is precisely at this point that she sees clearly—albeit through tears of understanding—the "insanity" of her own self-destructive inclinations.

Narrated in the language of captivity, the journey, and self-mastery, the heroine's process of cognition takes her from a personal history of Error to her own moment of Truth; obeying its own internal logic, the tale reaches at this juncture a rhetorical integration through the motif of the window and metaphors of fire (both read as figurations of her "mistake"), therefore clearly enclosing the essential features of a rite of passage: the heroine's entrance into another world, suggestive of her symbolic death and rebirth. At this point, one could propose that India functions as an analog of the mirror/window, given that the heroine sees herself through India's mirrors, viewing a self-image in Saheeda's passive acceptance of her fate as a woman ("In this world we are born on a stairway leading to the pyre"), and in the Rajput woman who becomes sati. In a manner of speaking, the heroine—while in her *wondering retreat*—sees "mirror" images of her abject condition; aware of the futility of further arguments with Saheeda ("But this I'll keep to myself. It is wrong. Wrong"), the heroine experiences the sudden blast of "difference" streaming into her world.

Viramontes plays with the tradition of the Romantic landscape in which the soul of the heroine or hero achieves, as it were, a cosmic connection to nature; obviously, she daringly deploys this tradition for anti-Romantic ends. If at the beginning of the tale the heroine's "confusion" and "distress" achieve their violent manifestation in a landscape described as threatening a storm or monsoon weather ("the clouds crack thunder and rain pours," frag. 9, p. 183), the heroine's eventual epiphany coincides with a "cosmic" clearing: "My head has finally cleared like the skies" (frag. 11, p. 185).

4. THE INTERDISCIPLINARY LEVEL

The repeated references to the "look" and to the discourse of objectification that functions as a subtext throughout "Why Women Burn," prompts us to reintroduce what might seem an old-fashioned existentialist source: Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the Look as a dynamic of possession; to look at the Other, according to Sartre, is to open possibilities of being objectified, of being one love among others, or of having the other as a foundation of my being through love (1994: 362).⁵ Viewed from this Sartrean angle, the heroine's love toward Javier would seem to be a choice to lose herself in Javier's subjectivity in order to get rid of her own. The result is the protagonist's dependent and self-destructive condition; Sartre has a term for it: masochism.

With the short story's ideological horizon now in view, one could well argue that in Viramontes' work the political transcends any other project, theory or "ism" based solely on sexuality, race, ethnicity, or on a liberal-minded multiculturalism that embraces a learned "tolerance" of the cultural Other. In "Why Women Burn," the multicultural argument is relocated to the grounds of law and custom, illustrated in the heroine's frank stand against sati, the practice of widow-burning, a custom that—although legally prohibited in India—is sometimes obeyed in spite of an existing legal interdiction.

Against this historical background, the heroine reaches an *epiphanic threshold* in the moment when she rejects suicide as an option. The cognitive move toward her own moment of recognition is expressed in spatial and ocular metaphors: in imaginary representations of a ritual ("I can see") and in an "estrangement" from the immediate world ("look beyond...I stare until"), thus confirming the purposes of a journey and of *questioning* in general:

Philosophical questioning starts in *thaumazein*, i.e., in wonder, and marvel. In wonder, indeed, man stands back from the immediate and from his most elementary and purely practical relation to it...In other words, in the wondering retreat, difference irrupts into the world. It is a difference that not only opens

up the world *as* world, viz., the world as a *whole*, but one that also constitutes that particular being who in the world, and in distinction from it, is capable of cognition. (Gasché 1989: 260)

If one returns to the story and rereads it as a tale of love, decomposing it into Propp-like structural components, one encounters deliberate inversions of a gender paradigm by means of a *feminized* male and a *masculine* female, thus inscribing possibilities of reading the *inconceivable* and *unthinkable* in the “patriarchal” story. For instance, Javier is introduced as a “pretty boy” who confines himself to the house, “plunging too deeply into despair...like a woman in labor” (frag. 5, p. 181), and with hair “down to his waist” (frag. 11, p. 186); in contrast, the heroine works, pays the rent, and—most important in the economy of the folktale—completes the *telos* of the journey that was intended originally for a “male” hero. As a desiring female subject, the heroine expresses her libidinous attachment to a feminized Javier, thus mentally transferring the image of a fully-conceived erotic bonding to a one-sided *libidinal bondage*—in this case, the heroine’s. At one point the recounting of her testimony turns into wistful reflection: the heroine confesses the enduring memories of her love toward Javier by stating: “I’d like to think he kissed me goodbye” (frag. 5, p. 181), a phrase that surfaces once again in the next two paragraphs, thus serving as a parenthesis to a remembered flame that somehow continues to fascinate and burn. At certain points in the narrative one wonders about the heroine’s continued libidinal attachment expressed rhetorically in the interplay between past experiences and recollection, and finally consummated in the language of desire:

I was drugged with sleep...but Javier was already upright, his back to me. He slept naked, and his back was as smooth and cool as a clear stream, his spine arched a bit....And I simply reached out for him, *so natural to reach for him*, to let my fingers touch the fluidity of his skin, run my fingers down the center of his back, the cool nakedness of a sleep uncovered throughout the night. (frag. 5, pp. 180-181, my emphasis)

The mythical *doubling* through androgyny is fulfilled through “mirroring” qualities: the will to suffering and the self-destructive bent in Javier and in the heroine (one in search of Nirvana, the other—to paraphrase Sartre’s analysis of masochism—losing herself in Javier’s subjectivity in order to get rid of her own); or in their *long hair*, beginning with the heroine’s change from “short croppy just woke up hair” (frag. 1, at the moment of the first encounter), to “my hair already long, the longest I remember ever having it” (frag. 2, p. 178, when she is in India about to begin her search for Javier). As with most *dioscuri* twins, the accompanying imagery leads to the figure of the Sun King and to the archetypal feature of long hair; hence, their solar and lunar

qualities serve as cosmic differences that ultimately end in separation. But the ability to shuttle back and forth between lunar and solar worlds belongs, from the beginning, to the female counterpart who, through the irony that characterizes “Why Women Burn,” states: “I was the transitory figure between two worlds” (frag. 5, p. 181).

The reading of “Why Women Burn” concludes with structural and ethical questions that can now be appropriately addressed before closing this study. To begin with, the narrative sequence that corresponds to the heroine’s Delhi-Jaipur train journey (fragments 6, 8) contains an episode that is understood by the heroine *after the fact*, that is, in fragment 10, where Saheeda reveals the self-immolation of the Rajput woman near Jaipur; at that point in time, the heroine and Saheeda are on their way to Pushkar Lake in a black Hindustan-Ambassador (“resembles a ‘54 Chevy bomb,” frag. 9, p. 183), a car that becomes the direct analog of the “sea green Chevy” in which Tía Olivia’s boyfriend drove away. The heroine’s moment of recognition, proposed here as a cognitive threshold, occurs at this juncture, with her choice to turn back home narrated in fragment 11 (185-186).

In light of the ascending tone reached at the plot’s “eleventh hour,” a reading might consider fragment 11 as the climactic point of the story, with anything added afterwards dangerously impairing the story’s sequence of events with an unforgivable anticlimax. And yet within the organizational scheme of “Why Woman Burn,” fragment 12—with an admitted decline in tone and with a last-minute flashback to Jaipur—turns away from the heroine’s moment of recognition to an episode involving a “radiant young girl” who, while in a lake, slips and suddenly jumps up, “as *wet* as a *boiled* cat” (186, my emphasis). This episode, consequently, functions as a moment of reconciliation between Ofelia and Saheeda (“we laughed”), while it simultaneously covers three levels of the story: it telescopes two elements (water and fire), and integrates, through association—albeit in an inverse manner (since she obeys her instinct of self-preservation)—a *place* and a *manner* of dying: Javier’s lake and the Rajput woman’s immolation through fire. Moreover, the conclusion suggests that, beyond differences in nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, or religion, our common humanity is bound by our natural instinct to embrace and defend life’s principles. To be sure, the cat’s alleged nine lives serve as a figuration of a natural desire to live, thus contrasting with Javier’s and the Rajput woman’s *unnatural* response to life.

Now that the text’s ideological dimension has been examined, the possibility of its critique requires that one recognize the ironic distance between authorial position and the story’s heroine; secondly, that the reader distinguish the manner in which India functions as the “cultural other” that illuminates the heroine’s subject

condition, therefore not necessarily as a “real” and comprehensive representation of a national history and culture. In the first instance, Viramontes characterizes the heroine as the prototype of the American tourist, that is to say, as a person who avoids foreign filth and squalor, including exotic meals that might induce nausea or vomiting. For example, as soon as the heroine arrives in the newer section of Delhi, she bathes, “careful not to let the polluted water” into her mouth (178); when she dines, she orders what she considers to be the safest—chicken curry—a dish she is “too familiar with because it’s almost like” Mexican mole (180); moreover, as she prepares to undertake her journey in search of Javier, Rajish—Saheda’s husband—says farewell and “offers a word of caution: ignore the dust in your tea” (181); lastly, aboard the train she is offered a *mausambi*, “but refuse with a wave of a hand because I know I’ll vomit” (182). The “American tourist” stereotype, consequently, serves to illustrate what Jameson defines as the “petty-bourgeois terror of proletarianization” and the fear of the lower depths and forbidden spaces (1996: 151). In Viramontes’ prose fiction, such terror is symptomatic of a modern outlook that, by definition, is deeply secular and critical of tradition.

“Why Women Burn,” as a result, turns into a narrative that provides the rhetorical raw materials that reintroduce the problem of historical representation as suggested in its archetypal journeys, descents to the underworld, and funerary rites that somehow include a symbolic rebirth; it is a story that can be read as a folktale or as an allegory of one’s emancipation from tradition and cultural programming. But I would suggest that one must resist the temptation of such “either/or” and imagine, instead, a reading that would take this contra-diction for what it is: a language in an adversarial mode, hence our need to search for a resolution of the text’s contradictions and misrepresentations in its own structural inability—in spite of its attempts to do so—to map a world setting. In other words, the misrepresentation of India’s history could be explained as a synecdoche in which a custom (e.g., sati or widow-burning) represents the whole; obviously, the historical minimalism whereby one reduces a national history to a practice that is unconsciously feared because it is a reminder of one’s own repressed national past would seem to be at the core of that modern passion which, according to Octavio Paz, exalts change, therefore making fetishes of the New and the personal. In any event, in reading Viramontes’ story I propose that we interpret its *misrepresentation* of India’s cultural history differently, pointing instead to Jameson’s commentary in relation to Adorno’s insight that any anachronism or historical falsifications in the work of art “are privileged symptoms of the latter’s deeper representational dilemmas and contradictions.” Jameson elaborates:

It is not because the facts have some prior claim over fiction that such 'flaws' are significant; it is rather because this violence to the logic of the facts betrays a deeper weakness within the very fiction itself, and a structural incapacity, for whatever reason, to construct a narrative that can map totality. (1992:41)

In keeping with the heroine's characterization, the image of India is reduced to a homogeneous and unified country ruled by the same religious funerary rites; such ideological minimalism, however, can only be the product of a modern bias that is closed to other historical possibilities of Being, particularly of traditional cultures that, instead of the usual static image, must be viewed as conflictive and contradictory. As Octavio Paz comments in *Vislumbres de la India*, India's Constitution recognizes 14 languages, in spite of the fact that its 1927 Linguistic Survey registered a record of 179 languages and 544 dialects in India prior to independence. Paz goes on to observe that in the region surrounding Delhi—a city with an ancient Islamic history—three languages are spoken: Urdu, Hindi, and Hindustani. These three languages contain India's conflictive history between Islam and Hinduism, a rift that resulted in the secession of Pakistan and Bangladesh (1995:81). One must note, consequently, that the heroine's journey to Rajasthan in search of Javier links two capitals, Delhi and Jaipur, and, in a manner of speaking, two different cultural worlds: one profoundly Islamic, the other originating in the ancient rulers of northern India, the warlike *Rajput* who claim their ancestry back to the 8th century. Although blind to these cultural and religious differences, the heroine in "Why Women Burn" unconsciously fears in India's Otherness the confrontation with regional practices that remind her of Mexico's ancient past, namely: human sacrifice and the sacred nature of war. According to Paz, the *Bhagavad Gita* exalts heroic violence as the warrior's dharma (1995:114). Based on this reading, one could propose that Viramontes' anti-war sentiments surface in "Why Women Burn" in figurations of a patriarchal history that, ultimately represented through the practice of widow burning in India, represents an intersection of imperial histories ranging from Ancient Mexico and the British Empire to present-day United States, thus a "world" that functions according to the *irrational* logic of domination, the conjugal pyre, and social violence.

"Why Women Burn" can be read, consequently, as an ideological resolution to contradictions in American democracy. In other words, the caste systems in India's and in colonial Mexico serve only as mirroring figurations of what the heroine of the tale fears the most, namely: the thought of a caste system in the United States. As a college educated Chicana, her dread of the lower depths and of pollution could be interpreted as a fear of insecure wage work, of family disintegration and of homelessness, hence a return to *untouchable* status.⁶

5. LEGACIES OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

In Viramontes's prose fiction, "Why Women Burn" belongs to a family of tales with similar situations and functions that one could define as the theme of the *abandoned woman* (e.g., "Birthday," "Snapshots," Petra in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, etc.). This story has its own intertexts in Chicana literature in relation, first of all, to *La Malinche*, a politically "maligned" historical figure and, secondly, to *La Llorona*, a folktale that conjoins a woman's abandonment with madness and acts of violence, either to self or family. As in other Chicana texts—e.g., Sandra Cisneros's short story "Woman Hollering Creek"—"Why Woman Burn" inverts folktale expectations: instead of violence resulting from an initial fit of female madness, the reading concludes with an illumination or with a renewed faith in life. Another important variable found in "Why Women Burn" is its geopolitical scope, linking Chicana feminism to the politics of love in a colonial narrative that textually incorporates the cause of feminists in India who oppose the custom of widow-burning.

With the focus of attention on Javier, the intertextual associations with Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* suggest yet another side to the story's *doubling*, with Javier—the story's "pretty boy"—functioning as a parody of Siddhartha, a "handsome Brahmin's son" who, after renouncing the world and joining the Samanas known for their self-denial, returns to a society of worldly appetites and material gain in his long journey towards wisdom. In light of the *Siddhartha* subtext, the parody encloses a double-reading of sorts, first with the pair heroine/Javier functioning as the "double" of Govinda/Siddhartha (note the inversions!) and, second, in the suggestion of Javier's own form of *masochism* in the sense that he is losing himself in Siddhartha's "misinterpreted" subjectivity in order to get rid of his own. Although the heroine was blind to her own condition of suffering dependency, she finally reaches an empathic understanding of Javier in spite of her avowed disagreement:

I breathed in, without the smell of incense and marijuana and tobacco, breathed in every morsel of the daily trivia that would help me sustain another night of Javier's endless pacing and one way philosophical discourse. It was only after he left, after I received his first and only letter, only then did I truly realize the extent of *his* torment. And there was nothing *noble* in it, nothing. (Frag. 5, p. 181, my emphasis).

The rhetorical coding of the breath of life associated with imagery of addictions—drugs, a dogmatic approach to spiritual teachings, etc.—underscores the unexpected reading of a generational condition in the late 1960s, that is to say, at the beginning of the Chicano student movement. An almost non-existent character in the

literature written by Chicanos, Javier emerges in Viramontes' story as the Mexican American hippie who engages in another form of colonialism: he undertakes a journey to India motivated by reasons that, according to the heroine, have nothing noble or Siddhartha-like.

The *pedagogical* intent in "Why Women Burn," consequently, is revealed as having its source in Chicana feminist criticism, questioning the reader's unconscious foundation of personal experience on customary social relations and on the internalization of self-destructive cultural practices. "Arguably, the title of Viramontes' story can not be read as a question ("Why Women Burn?"), but as a tacit clarification that contains a double answer: they burn because of a custom (sati), or because their notions of love are misguided. In light of contemporary critical theory, Viramontes' anti-Romantic stance finds echoes in Julia Kristeva who proposes that "we have crises of love" (1989: 7), and in Fredric Jameson who, in his analysis of Theodor Adorno's work, writes about the "internal impossibility in our time" of marriage, love, convention, and of a proper life with things (1990: 285). The fires of mourning or of love, therefore, have nothing *noble* about them because possession, madness and suicide make a parody of what, according to Viramontes, a true culture should be: an affirmation of life.

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NOTES

¹In her introduction to *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano acknowledges the demands on the "reader's ability to reconstruct the temporal sequence of events," adding that "[t]he language of the stories is rich and varied" (1985: 19). Linking formal techniques with feminism, Sonia Saldívar-Hull assesses Viramontes' work as follows: "Her groundbreaking narrative strategies, combined with her sociopolitical focus, situate her at the forefront of an emerging Chicana literary tradition that redefines Chicano literature and feminist theory" (1992: 322). Lastly, Norma Alarcón has found occasion to thematize the patriarchal in "Growing" and "Snapshots," proposing that in these short stories by Viramontes the Mexican/Chicano authoritative cultural model is the cause of a "crisis of meaning" in

women's gendered personal identity.

²Although anonymous, the heroine in "Why Women Burn" is identified as a character that appears in a previous short story by Viramontes, titled "Miss Clairol" (1987), thus providing us with her name—Ofelia—and her "biographical" background (that is to say, in both short stories the main character is known as "Champ"). A cross-textual reading would clarify the reasons for Ofelia's love toward Javier, a character with analogous "dysfunctional" features found in Arlene, Ofelia's mother; in other words, a *transposition* is done at the level of gender, rewriting man's alleged unconscious attraction to what turns out to be a surrogate for a maternal love object. On the other hand, understanding Ofelia's life background moves the reader to comprehension, thus grasping the extent to which she has attempted to bring a measure of order into her life in the face of constant chaos caused by loved ones (mother, boyfriend, etc.). Seen from this angle, Ofelia's liberation at the end of "Why Women Burn" is no small triumph.

³The fragments and their pagination are as follows: frag. 1, p. 177; frag. 2, pp. 177-179; frag. 3, p. 179; frag. 4, p. 180; frag. 5, pp. 180-181; frag. 6, pp. 181-182; frag. 7, p. 182; frag. 8, p. 183; frag. 9, p. 183; frag. 10, pp. 184-185; frag. 11, pp. 185-186; frag. 12, p. 186

⁴The theme of the "fractured male" also appears embodied in "Growing," where Jorge is described as "someone who spent most of his time listening to the radio" (*The Moths*, 38); also, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, where Alejo's condition becomes a figuration of the "broken man," both because of poverty and as a result of his illness caused by agricultural pesticides.

⁵Sartre also discusses "the triple destructibility of love," proposing that it manifests itself, first of all, as a "deception and a reference to infinity" (hence "an ideal out of reach"); secondly, at any moment the lover can make the loved one appear as an object (hence, "the lover's perpetual insecurity"); thirdly, love is an absolute perpetually made relative by Others (hence, "the lover's perpetual shame"). See *Being and Nothingness*, (371, 377).

⁶One could extend the analysis to other examples of Viramontes' s prose fiction; such a fear of *social retrogression* turns out to be a thematic constant, for example, in "Requiem for the Poor" (1976); in the young Ofelia, as she appears in the short story "Miss Clairol"; and in Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995).