

## Woman Alone. Towards a Feminist Ethics of Pleasure.

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Two girls playing at being adults ask one another:  
"And what are you going to be when you grow up?"  
"I'm going to be a mom."  
"No you can't be that alone, you must be something more."

One of the consequences of the work of the feminist movement in recent years has been the increasing prevalence, among many women who tried to be something more than a wife-mother, of the figure of the "woman alone" ("la mujer sola"; Lagarde, M. 1991). By "woman alone" I mean a woman with a consciousness of gender, who is usually educated, predominantly professional, independent, autonomous, economically self-sufficient, who may or may not have been married, have had children or not, but who lives alone, without a steady partner, or without a partner at all. This type of woman is characterized by the fact that she has a job, a view of life, and pursues activities which do not fit into the traditional system of feminine values which conforms to the patriarchal double sexual morality of Latin American countries.

Patriarchal ethics positions the valorization of feminine being and worth in relation to man. To be a woman is not to be a man. It is a "physiologicistic" ethics, in the sense that moral codes arise first out of the cycle of feminine biology, and second out of the relationship to men. Moral norms exist when one can procreate; they change when this capacity has been lost. A life has significance according to whether one is a daughter, a

*Etica feminista  
moral  
mujer sola  
feminista  
condicion de  
vida*

wife/mother, widow, separated, or single. Defined by the gaze, or by the familial relationship with a man, moral norms vary in each case, and do not coincide with masculine sexual norms. For example, a young woman who enters into sexual relations is "promiscuous", while a young man is "seductive"; an older woman who enters into such relations is "unhealthy", her male counterpart "affectionate".

I use the title of "woman alone" to distinguish this concept from the traditional idea of the "single woman" ("mujer soltera"), or even "spinster" ("solterona") which signify a woman who conforms to patriarchal normativity, to the extent that she receives and accepts the moral sanction of her inexistence or invisibility, on account of not being tied to a man who permits her "to be" young or old, a daughter, a wife-mother, divorced, or widowed.

In this paper I aim to critique patriarchal ethics, specifically its negative vision of women on their own. I want to demonstrate their value as paradigmatic figures of a new feminine identity, as transgressors of what Latin culture considers to be desirable, ideal, and worthy goals for women. This critique arises out of a feminist ethics of pleasure which considers feminine (and masculine interests), in so far as they are expressed by women (and men) for themselves, as the axiological basis of the being and worth of one's gender. This is an ethics which seeks that values be shaped through attitudes and behaviour, and not through the formulation of and obedience to norms. It is relevant to note here also that this ethical vision is not attempting to insert feminine ideas within masculine models. This project is more radical than that, in so far as it involves redefining ethics as an axiological perspective from which to evaluate daily experience in a more coherent form, since it takes

into account the changes of experience, not just a set of preformed doctrinal conclusions. In this manner, it explicitly attends to the experience of women, which has traditionally been ignored, in order to demonstrate valuable aspects of their activity and to try to understand this new form of life from an axiological perspective.

I wish to propose a practical and existential perspective which responds to the question of how to live, starting from total subjectivity and concrete personality, undertaking a reflexive construction of ends and values which enables one to go beyond mere spontaneity, and attain a desirable existential regime based on forms of reflexion and ideals which are specific to the lives of women. The final goal is to bring a legitimating ethics to feminist utopia.

The preceding section was intended as an introduction, not a completed vision. Now I will begin by specifying the figure of the "woman alone", such as it appears in the Mexican experience, which Alejandra Kollontai perceived in the expression "the new woman" ("la mujer nueva"), and Rosario Castellanos identified in the term "the woman who knows Latin" ("la mujer que sabe latín"). Then I will proceed to talk about the feminist ethics of pleasure, and make some observations. Finally, I will pose some problems.

### The "woman alone".

"It's very easy to be a good wife. You only have to find everything I say and do marvellous, and nag a little." *Two Serious Ladies*. Jane Bowles.

As I observed above, the "woman alone" is a figure who appears as a consequence of the feminist movement, perhaps because she has not had a long-term partner, and precisely because she does not do what her culture expects of a woman, that is, to play a subordinate role in her relationship to the man. These women have what I characterized above as a consciousness of gender. By consciousness of gender I mean that the person in question is a feminist, irrespective of the kind of feminism which she defends, and of whether she acknowledges herself as such. I call feminist the woman who considers that, by virtue of the fact that she belongs to a gender, specific things happen to her, which she herself might classify as positive or negative. That is, the variable factor of gender conditions the subject's actions and causes reactions in the persons with whom one relates, according to the gender to which one belongs. This is what I am referring to when I state that there is a consciousness of the fact that belonging to a gender brings with it infinite differences. Furthermore, the difference is read -in all cases- as an inequality of power with respect to the masculine gender, within any social class, race, ethnic group, or generation.

This paper is guided by the hypothesis that these women have tried, in one form or another, to erode that inequality, and that this is what has led them to shape the figure of the "woman alone" in relation to the necessity of finding a new ethics with which to legitimate their action. We see that "it fell to [these women] to lose themselves," as Rosiska Darcy remarks. She observes: "Suddenly to see age-old certainties dissolve in the space of a life,

to feel the floor give beneath their feet. And for that reason to have to assume, from now on, the hitherto unknown authorship of the feminine." (Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, "Entre memoria y proyecto," 1992) In this view, the single woman must construct for herself a new experience of the feminine, since she no longer recognizes herself in the images and representations which repeat the figure of the patriarchal "feminine eternal", and prepares to face the void as a starting point. It was the transportation of women to the outside world, to the world of men, but without abandoning the roots of the house. "It was like going into the outside world with the house under one arm," observes one woman. And thus we adopt masculine lifestyles, while maintaining the old feminine ways. For their part, men did not feminize themselves. We become the inhabitants of the "middle ground", receiving negative messages from the outside world because we do not adapt to the traditional ideal of gender. Therefore, without managing to achieve a full evaluation of the work we had done, since we still continued to be judged socially according to the traditional canons -of beauty, youth, or obedience to patriarchal ethics-, "[t]hus the dream of equality ran into the impossible." A man must only be a man, a woman must be ...a woman and, at the same time, follow the paradigm of the man, but without ceasing to be a woman. Darcy de Oliveira writes: "[A]nd nobody can be herself and another at the same time." The principle of identity governs in the social construction of gender." (Ibidem, p.16)

### Transgression.

"It is woman who remains, a willow branch keening on the riverbanks." "Dido's Lament." ("Lamentación de Dido") Rosario Castellanos (1988: 67).

The first task for the single woman trying to understand her situation is to answer two basic questions: "Who am I, and who do I want to be?," notes Mizrahi (Mizrahi, "La mujer transgresora," 1990). The first question is born out of the experience of estrangement from one's self, and seeks to produce a renewed hope of rediscovery of that self. Its starting point is the pain which the author feels is the true reaction to the loss of meaning. As the woman assumes her pain she begins the battle for survival. One combats dependency with critical recognition of one's own sickness in order to manage to make women's history what we want it to be, since behaviour is only changed when the perspective from which behaviour is evaluated is itself modified (Ibidem. p. 69).

It becomes necessary to invent a language and gender identity which will cancel out the feminine identity prefabricated by men. We know that the price of separating oneself from the stereotype is being alone, which does not imply that the solitude is imposed by a woman's own express desire, but that it is a consequence of the transgression of a traditional mode of relating to men. To be alone signifies that being and worth come from the woman herself, because she has committed the "sin" of renouncing the basic beliefs about femininity within the culture itself. One of these, the archetypal one, is determined by a binary opposition, as I noted above: to be a woman is not to be a man, and vice-versa. It is also said that the genders are "complementary", in the sense that there is no possibility of an independent identity, for either one. The woman "alone" is arbitrariness, the

disorganization of the status quo. She is without a place in society, between the past and the future, memory and plan. One combats dependency with critical recognition of one's own sickness in order to make women's history what we want it to be (Ibidem).

### **Who I want to be.**

"I would not exchange my fate of a lonely willow enraptured on the shore for anything." "Joyful Mysteries." ("Misterios gozosos") Rosario Castellanos (1972: 85).

The positive way to overcome uncertainty in the face of solitude is to become conscious of ambivalence as the true experience of identity, a point where pain and hope, frustration and desire meet. Change produces pain, which is not desired, but endured. One does not choose to suffer, one encounters pain because it is inevitable in any growth process, summed up in the English expression "growing pains". The consciousness of the difference between the two states is lived as a sense of guilt. Obedience to existing norms is the reward for non-change; solitude is the result of transgression. When woman gives birth to herself she becomes the transgressor of ancestral norms. In that sense, she loses her character in the face of life. She was born and formed to procreate, to be a wife-mother. Mizrahi states: "The woman who divorces herself (in a real or figurative sense) transgresses the mandate of obedience to man. Amongst other things, she separates herself [from him] in order to try to unite with herself." (Ibidem)

### **The feminist ethics of pleasure.**

The feminist ethics of pleasure openly appears as an interested position from which one makes judgements. Also, it makes explicit the kind of events it is interested in evaluating more than others. It considers a gender perspective to be central, the woman's consciousness of gender being seen in terms of the fact that the greatest ethical commitment is to the quality of her own life, and it is, for this reason, an ethics of pleasure. At the same time, it is a break with the normative patriarchal ethic based on traditional values which are hostile to our very condition, and which has characteristically defended premises alien to feminine realities (Maria Ladi Londoño 1991). Gender consciousness implies opposition to the deified values which, it is hoped, will govern human conduct, and which do not take feminine motivations into account, since they are derived from the universal parameter constituted by the masculine: the philosophy of the Western white male. Gender consciousness shows us that the patriarchal hierarchy of values does not consider our interests and that it puts forward values which are distanced from our reality. Therefore, in many cases it goes against our innermost consciousness. It is the power which forecloses our possibilities for pleasure.

### **Pleasure against power.**

The feminist ethics I am proposing seeks to disarticulate patriarchal values and "rethink ourselves in conditions of equality," as Cristina Grela states ("Ginocracia y creación," 1991, p. 3). The patriarchal ethics arises, specifically, out of the traditional family



structure, to which women of all strata are subjugated. It is for that reason that the burning question of the feminist ethics concerns women's self-determination, in terms of the position we wish to occupy in the family, and in the areas of sexuality and procreation. Without the traditional stereotypes in the family, the controlling and economic functions of patriarchy are altered, and when women assume control of reproductive rights there is a disarticulation of the "sacred" values of life which are defended by the hierarchies of power. There is a transgression of the moral normativity of the system of control, the obedience and duty of women. Woman becomes the transgressor of rationality and the opponent of traditional values. Evidently, guilt is born out of this syndrome.

#### **Awakening and guilt.**

Edna says: 'I would give up my life for my children, but I would not surrender my being.'  
Kate Chopin, "Awakening."

Guilt is generated by transgression of the accepted order. Guilt is overcome to the extent that "disobedience" is understood as a gesture made in protection of one's own interests and rights, which we have to decide out of our own experience. Let's take the case of feminine sexuality. In this sphere, there has only been consideration of procreation, for the sake of social convenience, while no thought has been given to feminine pleasure. It is precisely for this reason that the feminist ethics is an ethics of pleasure, one which first and foremost considers quality of life and, therefore, feminine pleasure. We have to discover the dark side of the moon, that is, all that corresponds to our perception, reasoning, feelings, and enjoyment. We have to raise ourselves out of the metaphorical conception of

the feminine, and construct a basis for our right as real people, in real situations and needing real life plans. Whereas we used to act in favor of a legality which did not take us into consideration, our duty now is to act in favor of our gender consciousness, once we have nourished it with our own experience, our interests and ideals. The legitimation of our own behaviour is more important than only considering that if one obeys, there are reasons to do so.

Women already have reasons. They are based on the conception of a feminine persona which is capable of constructing its own ethical imperative, beyond that of unquestioning obedience to the authority which was considered to be the archetype of feminine morality, of the manipulative exaltation of motherhood, or of the ontological patriarchal vision that evil arises from our feminine condition (Graciela Hierro, "La mujer y el mal").

Pleasure occupies a central place in our code: all that which constitutes "the good life" of which Aristotle speaks to us, but, for the first time, made available also to women. Educating ourselves for pleasure means thinking of love and affectivity in terms of their centrality, involving the person in her totality and recognizing the necessity of a spiritual sense of existence which goes beyond the here and now, and confers transcendence on our behaviour.

**From being for another to being for herself.**

The feminist ethics offers an important change in discipline, since it involves women in asking and answering ethical questions. This means that it takes a woman to be a "moral agent" (Mary E. Hunt, "Introducción a una revolución," 1991, p. 12), which implies assuming responsibility for the decisions in one's own life and, which is more difficult, having the ability to see them through. This brings with it, in consequence, a diversification of power as it is traditionally considered. Nobody will speak for woman, and no individual group of women can speak for all women. To this extent, each perspective within the feminist ethics varies according to the particular dimensions of the ethical subject. This does not mean that it can not be useful as an ethics in other contexts, but that from the perspective of power it cannot experience and speak for others, although it can listen to what women say (Goutman, Ana, "De la indignidad de hablar por otras.").

**The single woman as the paradigmatic figure of the ethics of pleasure.**

The single woman is the woman who has ceased to exist for another and has constituted herself as a being for herself, as a subject with a consciousness and the ability to create symbols. The way to symbolize things is an important form of power (Emily Erwin Culpepper, 1992, p. 8). Out of a basis in symbolic creation complete worlds filled with meanings are constructed. These are the tools with which we structure our understanding of the ego and of society. When we achieve a break with symbolic representations which are partial, inadequate, and false about feminine experience, our

histories and truths emerge, and a range of new symbols is created. Symbols have been shown to be powerful means of communication, control, and change, linked directly to material, political, and social affairs. It is for that reason necessary to examine the symbols which patriarchal consciousness constructs and maintains, and to create new symbolic instruments which correspond to our experience as we constitute ourselves as existing for ourselves. For millenia consciousness has been defined and analyzed by men, obviously on the basis of values which conform to masculine norms in such a way as to constitute our being for another, a set of affairs identified in de Beauvoir's concept of the "second sex". Masculine gender has been considered -consciously or unconsciously- as the subject of consciousness by the theory and practice of patriarchy. Models of the ego have been based on the masculine norm, and the history of consciousness has been the history of masculine consciousness. As women, we have been reduced to the symbol of "woman", representing the opposite of "man". The "woman alone" makes her life in this context, as a subject, and thus resists patriarchal domination. If, as women, we affirm ourselves as feminine subjects, we awaken the "I myself", thus achieving the liberation of our new consciousness. As the feminine subject is affirmed as "she", the "I myself" of all women, as representatives of our own being, is brought to life. We must assume it with complete responsibility, and make it into an ethical act. Ontologically, it is the first ethical act of feminine consciousness, since we must take responsibility upon ourselves as conscious and autonomous subjects in order to be able, in a second act of freedom, to make ethical judgements about our actions and decisions. In affirming ourselves as independent ethical

agents, we constitute ourselves as moral subjects creating values which are proper to us. For example, by taking possession of our bodies and their products we have seized the right to decisions about our pleasure and our reproductive power: "Women's affirmation that it can be moral to take the life of a developing fetus in order to achieve other moral ends in a usurpation of the masculine claim to be the supreme ethical authority." (Catholic Women for the Right to Choose) To this extent we are moral representatives who are constructing culture. None of us has the experience of having lived in a community where feminine experience is taken into account in determining the merit of acts, that is, where women are taken seriously as moral agents. We are conscious that feminist ethics forms part of the feminist utopia which is now being shaped, at least in its critical projection. Although they act according to their consciences, women who adhere to this type of reflexion and ethical action still encounter social rejection and the guilt of the superego which still lacks a feminist memory. This woman considers herself to be a transgressive person.

#### **The woman who knows Latin.**

The intensification of women's intellectual lives brings with it an intensification of their creative lives, and this produces changes in their daily life. Creativity combats all that which aspires to subjugation in a woman, not just the attempts to subjugate her which come from outside. Creation also implies denunciation. The "woman alone" turns herself into an emissary of truths which she perceives and which have been masked by culture. By

denouncing them she starts the process of change through which rigid, arbitrary norms and stereotyped values are demystified. She becomes a sniper who shoots at tradition. It is useful to remember, observes Mizrahi, that "the greatest obstacle to the process of growth is within oneself." (op. cit. p. 86)

### **Projecting the future.**

What has the "woman alone" achieved?

She has achieved her being by breaking the traditional morality of her gender, just like Kate Chopin's "Edna", whom I mentioned at the beginning, when she states: "I would give my life for my children, but not my being." And thus she sinks into the Atlantic to preserve her moral decision to be for herself, just as Socrates took the hemlock, Christ the cross, and as so many other persons have done, some leaving behind them a great work, others promising of a new life. Edna saves herself in losing herself. The heroine is not led to her decision by the man she loves, and who abandons her. Neither could another man save her from losing herself. After the "awakening" it is impossible to return to the old lost consciousness, and she does not see the possibility of reconciling her "new woman's" self with the present circumstances of her life. She is the transgressor of a social order, and to this extent she achieves liberty in choosing her own road. She occupies a different position in the family and becomes an autonomous being who fulfills her ethical mission: the search for the good life, the search for pleasure, in her case her eroticism.

As women redefine their own sexuality the different levels of their self-realization will appear, in their relationships with their own bodies, with others, with their children, with time, with spirituality, with pleasure, with the qualities that make them interesting, with youth, and with beauty. If we, as women, succeed in defining the cultural significance of our own sexuality, different possibilities will emerge for women's spiritual creation to be a process of liberation. Finally, the subject of consciousness who emerges from the new gender identity is the one who is announcing new and better possibilities of more symmetrical relations between the genders.

## **Problems.**

### **1. Other women.**

Up to this point I have spoken about women, about the feminine problem of the "woman alone". But to which women am I referring? I am referring to all those who, in some manner, have resolved the problem of economic survival. I am not speaking of the enormous numbers of women who are concerned every day with the struggle to survive. In this group there is no gender identity. There are neither men nor women, only beings menaced by desperation. What can we do, as women, to help others who suffer with this problematic? A part of our social responsibility involves redefining the nature of our participation, be it in the home, with children, at work, in our studies, with our partners, in the streets, the market, and in creation, opening new spaces for development (Mizrahi, *op. cit.*, p. 108). The responsibility for conscientization falls to all women, irrespective of the

social or economic class to which we belong. This is the true ethical question: to open fields of knowledge, for the "woman alone" and for moral decisions.

## 2. The "glass ceiling" syndrome.

Violence against women who seek their own development ranges from physically preventing them from entering the public world to social rejection if they achieve entry, the experience of marginalization or the "glass ceiling",<sup>1</sup> that is, the impossibility of rising to positions of leadership. Moreover, as was already said, the consequence of their going out into the public world is the difficulty encountered in forming stable relationships, with rupture, and marginalization from relations between the genders.

## 3. Hyparchia's doubt.

"Do you think that I made a wrong decision in abandoning the loom and devoting my time to my education?" Hyparchia, Greek philosopher, 4th century B.C.

Will it have been a wrong decision, in the moral sense, to devote oneself to one's own education. Maybe they ought to have obeyed patriarchal morality. Perhaps they would be happier, they would have companions, they would not be the "women alone" that they are, and would enjoy appreciation in society.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Mabel Burin for her explanation of the concept of the "glass ceiling".



#### 4. The question of Edna.

Did I devote enough time to my children?

Will the problematic with which I afflicted each one of them perhaps be a consequence of the time "taken out" from caring for them, and devoted to my own education? From Freud on, the concern for the well-being of children comes from the mother. Fathers are not directly responsible for the mental health of their offspring; it is the mothers, and this is a piece of knowledge endorsed by the basic foundation of patriarchal morality: the science of psychology.

#### 5. An ethics only for women?

Seemingly, the feminist ethics of pleasure only concerns women. However, it deals with the topics which are most central to the social imaginary. Its development is not only for women, but also for humanity, since it indicts unviable accepted norms in order to question the contemporary reality of gender relations. As we have seen, in many cases the personal development of women condemns them to be alone. The personal development of men makes it possible for them to choose their life options and their interpersonal relations from a broader spectrum. The task of an ethics of pleasure for the genders is to overcome this difference.

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