

Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974)

Gale Database: Feminist Writers

Rosario Castellanos's haunting portrait of life in rural Chiapas, Mexico, during the 1930s, during the "ejido" land reform programs of Mexican president Lázaro Cardenas, features aspects of her philosophy of life and her objection to the oppression of women and Indians by the dominant Hispano-European Mexican society. *Balún Canán* (1957), translated as *The Nine Guardians*, is both a very personal recollection and an historical reconstruction of a period that would radically alter her own existence-- as it ultimately did that of many other "Ladino" families--while also offering a glimmer of hope to the long-oppressed Indians of the region. In *Balún Canán* Castellanos recounts incidents from the perspective of a seven-year-old girl; by doing so, she allows very little clarification of complex issues of justice, fairness, ethnic fear, and misunderstanding.

Such issues would receive a less lyrical, more analytical treatment in Castellanos's numerous essays on social justice and feminine equality. Her belief that social enlightenment and the ability to become active in one's community would lead to self-respect and dignity underlay much of her writing, itself a reflection of the difficult and often very painful life that she led. She encouraged her countrywomen, in particular, to cease their complicity in their own oppression: intellectual and emotional enfranchisement must be embraced rather than the self-sacrificing image dictated by Mexican society. Castellanos's *Sobre Cultura femenina* [On Feminine Culture], published in 1950, and her collection of essays entitled *Mujer que sabe latin...* [A Woman Who Knows Latin...] are credited with being two of the cornerstones of Latin feminist literature.

Castellanos was born in 1925, in the mountainous state of Chiapas, remote from the capital city of Mexico, where her family owned large tracts of land farmed by Indian tenants in the production of sugar and coffee. She was older than her brother Benjamin; after his death at the age of six she remained as the only child in a family whose wealth and social position were slipping away due to land reform implemented by Mexico's post-revolutionary government. Benjamin had been the apple of his parents' eye; as a male he would have inherited their wealth and position. Castellanos, on the other hand, was overly protected and smothered by parents whose hope it was that she receive an education sufficient for her to become a pharmacist, that she marry and have children for them to fuss over. Feeling the stigma of belonging to the "less worthy sex," Castellanos strove to overcome her feelings of inadequacy and, at the same time, sought a more intellectual education than the one chosen for her.

When she was still a teenager, the Castellanos family left the provincial capital and took up residence in Mexico City, where Rosario finished her secondary education and began studying at the



Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) while living at home, as is typical for Mexican students. In 1948 both parents died suddenly, within a month of one another. Castellanos finally achieved freedom, though it was spoiled by her overwhelming sense of loneliness and guilt as a survivor. She saw further involvement in University life as an available remedy for each, and studied towards a doctoral degree in humanities and sociology. Upon completion of her formal education, she returned to Chiapas, where she sought to relieve the social ills--unemployment, illiteracy, undermedication and poor general health, and superstition--that plagued the local Indian population. In addition to working towards social reform, her participation in the Instituto Indigenista San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1956-57 would be Castellanos's first foray into socially instructive theater. The plight of the Indians of Chiapas weaves its way intricately into much of the fiction of Castellanos. The novels and short stories that deal with the lives of the Indians in relation to the "ladino", the white men, is known as her "Chiapas Cycle." In novels such as *Oficio de tinieblas*, translated as *Tenebrae Service* (1961), she includes in this fabric of Mexican oppression of its people, the difficulty of women as well as Indians in a society that values masculinity and European Hispanicity. Castellanos's service among the Indians lasted only two years, and then she returned to Mexico City where she became an extraordinarily popular professor of literature at the UNAM.

She was married for a brief time to a professor of philosophy; after several miscarriages the couple bore a son, Gabriel, in 1961. Castellanos's marriage would dissolve during Gabriel's childhood, and this failure added to her already deep-seated feelings of loneliness, though it did not diminish her inordinate productivity as a poet and commentator on Mexican life, or as a novelist.

When *Balún Canán* was published in 1957 it was the recipient of critical acclaim, as was her poetry and subsequent short fiction. The most unique aspect of Castellanos's portrayal of Indian life was her refusal to create an idealized portrait of the noble savage. Instead, her treatment of all literary characters as complete people and round characters lent fullness to their stories. Even with their flaws exposed, the Indians could be seen as having been treated unjustly.

Castellanos's incorporation of the lyrical and mythical language of the Tzeltal-Tzotzil peoples creates texts that are haunting and mysterious, as though she were at times transcribing the experience of the Indians from their own tongue. Myrilyn Allgood describes her writing as a counterpoint of abstract/concrete, lyric/narrative, image/idea, and this structure pervades much of the Chiapanecan, as well as other periods of her literary production. In several of her commentaries on the condition of women in Mexico, the tone is markedly different, however, with an ironic playfulness that derides the machista tendency toward domination. Specifically, her farcical play *El eterno femenino* (1957) deals with the role assigned young women in Mexican society. It includes numerous historical figures, such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and La Malinche, who decry the notion that women lose their attractiveness and their value as people just as soon as they are married. Castellanos's depiction of a young woman at the beauty parlor on the eve of her wedding day is peppered with clever insights about the historical, social, and economic issues that trouble women of Mexico and prevent them from achieving an equal footing with men in their society.

Despite the self-deprecating tone often seen in her essays and her poetry-- "I'm rather ugly. It all depends on/the hand that applies the make-up" she writes in "Self-portrait" in *Poesía no eres tu* (1972)-- Castellanos was one of Mexico's most highly acclaimed writers, and certainly the first woman since Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the 1600s to achieve such a wide readership. In 1967 she was named "Woman of the Year" in Mexico, and in 1971, she won the prestigious Sourasky Prize for literature, the same year she was appointed as Mexican ambassador to Israel. In addition to her diplomatic duties, Castellanos lectured on Latin American literature in Israel.

Tragically, Castellanos' life was cut short in August of 1974, when she was accidentally electrocuted in her apartment in Tel Aviv. Had she lived longer, Rosario Castellanos would surely have continued to occupy her prestigious place in Mexican letters, and she would have continued to advocate women's and Indian's rights in Mexico.

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Nationality: Mexican. **Born:** Comitán, Chiapas, 25 May 1925. **Education:** Attended Universidad Nacional Autonoma (UNAM), Mexico City and received a fellowship to study in Madrid. **Family:** Divorced; one son. **Career:** Professor of literature, Universidad Nacional Autonoma Mexico, Mexico City; lecturer at universities throughout the United States and at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1971-74; served as ambassador to Israel, beginning 1971. **Awards:** Named Mexican Woman of the Year, 1967; Sourasky Prize for literature, 1971; **Died:** Tel Aviv, Israel, 7 August, 1974.