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"Mi Condición de Sirena": The Diasporas of Gabriela Avigur-Rotem and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz

Amalia Ran

The experience of arriving from the "other" shore is inherited in the Jewish condition, and is often related to the absence of an authentic origin, thus impeding the univocal determination of the "private" and the "collective" while narrating the personal history and evoking the past. The impossibility to belong to one place and the individual dilemma facing the surrounding society require considering the ethnic, racial, and cultural elements, as well as those factors concerning class and gender, and their inter-textual and intra-textual significances when analyzing the ambivalence of the Jewish newcomers.

In the case of Gabriela Avigur-Rotem (1945, Israeli resident since 1950) and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz (1945), native Judeo-Argentinean writers, this absence corresponds also to their exclusion as women and daughters of immigrants, and with their sense of alienation and exile prior to the decision to leave their place of origin. Writing from Israel and France, these two authors accept their exile (real and imagined) as part of an ontological operation mode; a personal alienation from their immediate surrounding which expresses this bifurcated sensibility. How is this self-implied marginality represented in the literary works? What are the significances of the act of departure and the desire to return in each particular case?

Associated with the condition of estrangement and the negation of an identity, exile, interpreted here as "a discontinuous stage of being" (Said 177), designates an existential difference and an impossibility to belong within
a determined space due to the act of departure. I emphasize
the psychological effect of this condition since I wish to
observe the impact of exile as a literary motif within Avigur-
Rotem’s and Dujovne Ortiz’s texts. My intentions are to
focus on how exile impacts the nostalgic narrativization of
the lost home, the production of an imagined Argentina,
and how it shapes the way the characters view this space.
It should be noted that the image of Argentina that emerges
from the novels Mozart lo haya yehudi (“Mozart Was not A
Jew,” 1992) and El árbol de la Gitana (“The Tree of the Gypsy-
Lady,” 1997) is related, first and foremost, to a double sense
of marginality emphasized primarily by the characters’
migratory experience and, at the same time, by the fact that
this image is created from a geographic and psychological
distance with respect to the narrative voice.

Before I begin my analysis, I would like also to stress
that the identity crisis as described in the novels exposes a
multiplicity of voices that dialogue among themselves and
which are distinguished, in gender terms, by their normative
function. Departing from Judith Butler’s definition, I propose
to study this gender classification, manifested verbally or by
writing, as distinctive constituting modalities that interact
in discourse (6); in other words, I suggest analyzing the
question of “gender” in the following examples as a cultural
construction, “a free-floating artifice” (10), since it opens
another possibility to articulate the different power relations
beyond the binary of masculine/feminine applied by Butler
in Gender Trouble. In this fashion, other performative acts
can be studied as well.

El árbol de la Gitana, by Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, begins
with the protagonist’s departure to a self-implied exile in
Paris. This character whose homonym identity—Alicia
Dujovne Ortiz—suggests introducing an autobiographic
story, is a journalist and a single mother, who chooses to
leave Argentina in 1976 when the military junta assumes
power. The Parisian exile provokes the desire to resort to
the series of exodus and adventures of the protagonist’s
traveler ancestors, in order to try understanding by the display of the family trajectory the reason of exile. This last deterritorialization triggers a never-ending story told by the protagonist/Scheherazade, who is chased by her ancestral ghosts and who is obsessed with the past. The latter emerges also from the Gypsy-lady’s stories, the “fat lady with the dangling double chin, live portrait of the insane old lady I will become” (El árbol 22, my translation)—a hybrid alter-ego of the narrator and the figure her mother. Her stories that always end with a moral lesson relevant to the actual situation of the protagonist, construct brick by brick the genealogical tree and the puzzle of the family history. Additionally, the repetition of previous experiences lived by the Catholic and Jewish ancestors throughout centuries, offers an explanation to the chaotic present of Argentina. Dominated by departures and returns, the past acquires another dimension when the novel suggests viewing the wandering condition as hereditary and perpetual.

To face past memories (both those invented in the narrative work and the ones which conserve concrete episodes of the past) implies to revisit the wider historical context, from the conquest of America and the Spanish colonization to the formation of Argentina as an independent republic and the establishment of its national myths. However, the natural acceptance of the Gypsy-lady’s presence produces an inversion within the text; the unreal is considered more genuine than what has been accepted so far as real. This rupture also leads to the destructuration of the dual relation between the real/the fictitious within the novel (Barisone 139). Therefore, the fantastic elements offer an independent passage to relate to the unexplainable and to interrogate the Argentinean “reality,” understood here as the political and technological power of a culture; a political act (Duncan 54). In short, fantasy establishes a model to approach the canonical history and to question certain experiences of the past. Various characters such as the Gypsy-lady, El que Nos Sueña (“The One Who Dreams Us”)—a possible
divine force —, the unicorn, and the Third Eye dominate this vacillating space. The text does not explain their presence but displays the narrative possibility to modify history and to play with the alternative historical versions that bifurcate as the plot advances.

The geographic distance from Argentina allows the protagonist to reevaluate its implications while reformulating her identity and clarifying other motives that determine her condition as half Jewish, since all of a sudden, she realizes her exclusion had started even before her departure. During 1988, Dujovne Ortiz confessed in an interview: “he sufrido bastante mi condición de centauro (o de sirena), ser medio judía. Ser medio judía nacida en Buenos Aires —que es por sí un lugar de exilios” (“Las tribulaciones de un centauro” 88). Under this view, the Parisian exile adds to another feeling of marginalization: for being half Jewish and for being born in a city of immigrants and exiles. The geographic and linguistic deterritorialization is previous to the decision to leave Argentina and, hence, represents an ontological mode of personal detachment from the immediate surrounding.

To think of Argentina from the Parisian solitude is also related to the search for an origin composed by a multiplicity of exodus and departures. Additionally, it corresponds to a bifurcated conscience, a semi-“schizophrenic” condition driven by exile. Thus, the concern regarding the past becomes an existential obsession in the new place of residency:

Mis propias investigaciones históricas alcanzarían a llenar los huecos de un pasado tanto menos importante que el presente dolor [...] ¿Por qué no fui geranio, si bastaba ese poco de tierra para tener raíz? De haberme quedado en mi maceta del barrio Flores, no andaría la Nena por la selva mientras adentro mío la Gitana me enmarañada con venas turbias y con juegos espesos. El exilio y la locura se parecen mucho (El árbol 90-91).

The past revealed nostalgically with the physical distance from the Argentinean soil cannot cure the actual pain and solitude. The memories from the native city testify to the
wish to conserve a space which probably has never existed and, nonetheless, was the vital motor during the hard years of being away.

With the re-democratization process in Argentina, a new opportunity to review the past emerges with the return home. However, despite this new alternative, Buenos Aires loses its privileged place as the space of communication with memory, and its symbolic status as an historic archive.² Both New York of the exiled friends as Jerusalem of the Jewish writers’ conference allow the protagonist to share with others the dislocation feeling and to dream of other possible lives. Thus, the present only offers temporal spaces to reformulate the identity and eliminates the geographic distance as a creative motif of Diaspora. The wandering experience and the crossing of linguistic and political borders become contemporary necessary acts in order to dialogue with history, so that exile may be articulated as another artifact within the construction of the Judeo-Argentinean identity. As mentioned previously, the dilemma of double loyalty openly expressed during the protagonist’s exile in Paris alludes to the alienation experienced while still living in Argentina. The hybridism and wandering experience are accepted from the beginning of the novel as elemental conditions of the human existence. Hence, the text’s main concern does not consist of the traditional dilemma of “being Jewish” and/or “being Argentinean,” but of the relevance of these terms for the personal and collective identity formation, always under the sign of a perpetual search.

The physical detachment generates a “renaissance” which consists of the redefinition of the national “places of memory.”³ In her interview with Jason Weiss for Hispamérica, Dujovne Ortiz confirmed:

creo que no conocí la experiencia del dolor hasta que no me separé de mi país. Y curiosamente después eso se convirtió en una lección [...] Nunca me hubiera podido ocupar de los temas míticos de la Argentina,
como Maradona, Gardel, Eva Perón; jamás me hubiera ocupado de eso viviendo en Buenos Aires. ¿Por qué? Porque viviendo en Buenos Aires soñábamos con vivir en París. El sueño se invierte, y al vivir efectivamente en París, ¿qué es lo que te puede interesar? La Argentina que soñaba con vivir en París, no puesto que ya está. Entonces lo que te interesa a partir del exilio es el país misterioso, la Argentina popular, la Argentina de los mitos populares (52-53).

Who is it who dreams this Argentina? For the protagonist, the narrative stream, Scheherazade style, disguises the redefinition of the “sites of memory” in a way that corresponds to her particular circumstances; hence, to her condition as exile, a single mother and a writer in the diaspora.

To a certain extent, this narrative voice is characterized by the “absence of rigidity, by this type of something fluid” (56) associated with female narrativization. Viewed as such, the Argentinean and Jewish elements are defined as maternal entities linked to the “semiotic” sources (according to Kristeva’s definition), in summary, to the feminine mold distinguished by the repetitions and multiplication of significances, and by an undefined quantity of images and metaphors. Consequently, the disorganization of the historical materials is an inherit part of this particular thinking mode. The chronological rupture, the abundance of secondary characters whose stories never converge in the main storyline, and the narratives that flow from the Gypsy-lady as a fantastic and phantasmagoric stream of tales, propose an innovative technique to reflect on the archive. The Gypsy-lady’s anecdotes leave the subjectivity of each one of the characters open for future interpretations and modifications. In that sense, “being Argentinean,” as much as “being Jewish,” is accepted as a situation of a permanent exclusion; by the same token, it implies to belong to an archive of others, another archive of which secrets of origin require a new appropriation.
The novel *Mozart lo haya yehudi*, by the Israeli-Argentinean author Gabriela Avigur-Rotem, narrates the story of two Jewish families, who immigrated from Czarist Russia to Argentina at the turn of the nineteenth century. *Mozart* seems to return to the migratory episode of the Gidekels and the Gurmans to express through the mixture of past and present languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, and Russian), a similar sense of dislocation and marginality. Nevertheless, this novel’s intentions are different. It should be noted that this work published originally in Israel, uses the Hebrew alphabet to inscribe different dialogues originally expressed in various languages. The plot advances in Hebrew, disguised with the poetic narrative style as a biblical and archaic language, and reveals the richness and abundance of symbolic and lyrical expressions, typical of the Sacred Text, in order to reconstruct the idiomatic and cultural “melting pot” of the newcomers.

If Dujovne Ortiz proposes in her novel to navigate between two main shores—the European from where the immigrants arrived and the Argentinean where they have landed—this novel offers a different destination to disembark. Israel acquires here a concrete form that unifies both dreams and reality, and which offers for the very first time to eliminate the existential distance between history and the personal experience. Being Jewish and Argentinean in this new place becomes the expression of a new identity: being Israeli, a Jewish immigrant in a land dominated by fellow Jews whose future is immersed in the original biblical land, though their roots may be dispersed all over the globe.

The chronological disorganization characterizes this novel as well, and is associated with the fantastic elements which play an important role by providing an explanation of the personal motives and the intimate relations not declared openly within the text. The vacillation effect is also related to the spatial and historical rupture of the plot. For instance, Rafael Alberto Gidekel is capable of moving
objects with his glance and can predict the future. His capacity to foretell future events echoes to some degree the omnipresent narrator's attempts to insinuate the future. The extraordinary emerges when the text unifies the family histories suggesting that a major force is responsible for the cross of destinies and events. When the representatives of both families meet finally in Israel to reconstruct the genealogical tree, they remember the following conversation between Rafael and Regalo, his relative:

when I pressured him, he told me: 'I don't know about this more than you do,' and when I further pushed him to admit that he had forgotten this prophecy during the years since then, he told me: 'right, you don't know how hard it is to remember both what happened and what will happen, and not to mix both.' So maybe, according to him, I have already found the deposit, and I simply don't know it, this is why I asked you so many questions regarding the necklace, and tried to get it from him as well, somehow, but you already know how he is since what happened with Graciela—'

But not yet.

They are still together to bear a thickening lineage of daughters that would wrap Graciela's flexible ankles, while she is mistaking the thirst which attacks her body after each birth with the thirst of an empty space, wishes to become full and to sprout life; they are still together, giggling shyly at the shores of the dark lake of family's secrets (245, my translation).

The thematic and chronological fragmentation becomes the representation of language as a sign of society in midst of constant transformation. I base this last point on Oryan's argument regarding Hebrew as a vehicle which lacks archaic words (6), and that connotes a linguistic simultaneity (with the allusion to different languages, countries and migratory experiences) representative both of the Jewish origin and of the experience of settling down in Israel. The novel departs
from the same diasporic notion expressed in Dujovne Ortiz's novel—a necessary resort while narrating the tale of the Jewish immigrants in Argentina—, however, its focus shifts to describe another dilemma. Published first in Hebrew for Israeli readers, Mozart returns to the Argentinean past recuperated from Israel. Unlike other novels which treat the Jewish migratory experience in Argentina,4 this text narrates the European past using the autobiographical elements with another aim in mind regarding the founding archives. The fact that this novel was first published in Israel allows us to examine how the historical materials regarding the immigration to Argentina, and the departure to Israel decades later, impact personal affiliations in other spaces. It should be noted that in this work the feeling of alienation and the notion of diaspora are testimonials of an individual crisis not resolved upon the return to the mythological origin; the relocation to Israel.

The novel's particular tone consists of the experience of marginality shared by the narrator and her characters, since for Avigur-Rotem, it is the revaluation of her childhood as a new immigrant kid in a kibbutz which marks the beginning of a self-questioning process. The possible reconciliation after eliminating the geographic distance with the object of desire—Zion—, as suggested by the proper author, is evident when she understands as an adult that in this new destination everyone suffers from some sort of a personal conflict, due to the migratory experience and the condition of being the other for generations. Hence, to recuperate memory implies to accept this situation as a positive and enriching experience that provokes to create. It is the source of the interest in the migratory past and the wandering condition. This is also the reason why there is a need to recreate these experiences as viable alternatives that correspond to the momentary conditions, and why the story should be told in Hebrew, the recuperated language by the proper immigrants.

Yet according to the protagonists, the idealized image
of Israel, the one that represents the “true” motherland of origin, is associated with a feeling of double loyalty since it challenges the role played by Argentina as the patria of residency. It is the origin of the Gurmans’ and the Gidekels’ dilemma. Considering the biographical elements exposed in the plot, this conflict is also related to another problem due to the fact they opt to immigrate to Israel; thus, due to similar conditions that conduce as well to the feeling of dislocation. In regard to this point, Avigur-Rotem highlights the fact that feeling as part of the Israeli collective (for being a member of a kibbutz who was raised in Israel and who dominates Hebrew) does not exclude other contradictory notions of marginality. Her identification with the Argentinean imaginary, inscribed in the miniscule mental and cultural differences between each one of these societies, consists of a permanent distinction between that “level of tone,” and the condition of “living between two patrias” which characterizes her sensibility.

As a result, the duality is not resolved upon immigration to Israel. Instead, it is replaced with another type of confrontation: in Argentina, the Jewish immigrants are searching for the “promised land” by inventing myths and stories; in Israel, they lament another intangible space — the nostalgic childhood in Argentina. In my interview with the author, Avigur-Rotem admitted:

Personally, I do not feel Argentinean, but there are other factors of identification that do matter. I am Israeli, but I do not feel as a native born Israeli. There are miniscule differences [...] as immigrants in Israel there is a cultural shock upon the encounter with the Israeli aggressiveness. It is another mentality. Sometimes, with native Israeli friends I feel the difference between us in that level of tone as if I had come from another place.

Mozart lo haya yehudi focuses on accepting the migratory experience as a basic condition of being Jewish. In that sense, like Argentina, Israel is chosen as a destination to
begin a new life, but represents a conflictive space where processes of acculturation and social integration add to other difficulties of everyday life.

With the arrival of the news from the Second World War in Europe, the Gurmans and the Gidekels fear a similar fate in Argentina, recognizing that a racist and Anti-Semitic background already exists in this country as well. Fearing history might repeat disappears in one particular place: in Israel, the biblical "promised land" and a new migratory destination for the characters. Arriving at the desired place does not mean eliminating the differences, but using them to narrate the individual past. The novel suggests that despite the fact that in Israel "being Jewish" means a lesser conflictive relation with the state apparatus, other characteristics that define the newcomer as the other do drive to an inner conflict there as well, such as the fact of arriving from distinctive ethnic collectivities or of belonging to different social classes.

Dujovne Ortiz uses the autobiographic materials in order to appropriate the archive in a mode defined here as pertinent to the feminine voice; however, is this also true in the case of Avigur-Rotem? In order to contest this point, it is relevant to study some of the female protagonists in Mozart. The anonymous character of "ella" ("she") deserves a special attention, since it incorporates various symbolic female figures of the absent woman: "she" is the missing lover of uncle Moises; she is also Estela, the first piano instructor in the Gidekel household whose sudden departure coincides with the discovery that she was also the object of desire of Leon, the clan's father. For Aaron Gurman, "she" represents his aunt Anita with whom he is secretly in love, unreachable, mysterious and distant. At the same time, "she" symbolizes other women as indicated in the text:

[...] the stranger that arrived one day to Mar de Oro and took out from a black patent bag some folded documents with Russian letters, bringing them closer to Anita's vague look. And couldn't it be the
same stranger, who due to her presence 'the Indian jumped out of our lives as a cork of Champaign’s bottle,’ as Moises would describe her, of course, it could not be the stranger who gave birth to him and left him in the orphanage, and later returned, took some money and went away, and probably it could be another stranger to whom Leon is waiting impatiently, every day, in Celeste Café, not so far away form here, but always when something precious is lost, we tend to search for it far away, the furthest away we can, suffering from so much desperation and agony (173, my translation).

In that sense, “she” may be the representation of everything which is unreachable as the proper “promised land,” always desired and aloof. Mozart’s representation of the female characters often offers absent and inter-changeable figures despite the fact women are the ones to establish homes in the new country and maintain a relative stability in times of crisis. It seems that they figure as involuntary participants in the history that evolves around them, and their personal motives are only revealed after they disappear from the map. More than any other protagonist in the novel, it is Ida Gidekel, the ironic and patient mother of eight who best represents the dilemmas of dislocation. Her silences and passivity, so antagonistic to her husband’s whims, along with the difficulties in the new land are summoned up in a contained protest: “I do not find myself a space” (Mozart 97), and a quiet acceptance of: “ij hob nisht a breire. Life goes on” (100). The lack of a private concrete and emotional territory, an absence evident in Dujovne Ortiz’s novel as well, emphasized by the flowing stream of conscience, is distinguished in Mozart by Ida’s silence. It is only when she grows old that some of her secrets and wishes are revealed, such as her true passionate love not towards her husband but his business partner, Mr. Weinberg, who supported her during the hard years Leon wandered in the countryside (292).
Surprisingly, prior to her death which coincides with the day Evita Peron passes away, Ida Gidekel loses her last opportunity to become a protagonist of her own history. With the multitude of crowds that sweeps the streets of Buenos Aires to vigil the First Lady, Ida’s mourning rituals, the shiva, are postponed since nobody from the closer family can arrive home. She is silenced forever with her secrets, and dies alone without anyone by her side to accompany her in these last moments. The end of the novel proposes to break this silence with the presence of the last piano to survive her tremulous life. With Leon’s departure to Israel after Ida’s death, all the household objects are distributed but one: The same old piano Ida refused to sell because of its sentimental value. This musical instrument is left in the Gidekel’s house as a testimony of lost lives, dreams never attained, and the motherly aches silenced by music. The flowing of words and of musical notes, as the flowing of time, become the remaining signs of an absent story.

While the protagonist of El árbol de la Gitana collects the fragments of the past and accepts the hybrid origin and the wandering experience as undeniable forces, Mozart uses these elements to question the dream of a promissory origin. The novel returns at the end to the issue of marginality by observing if in Israel the feeling of dislocation disappears. Nonetheless, the novel concludes that this final destination does not offer an immediate reconciliation; it just opens the possibility to narrate a story that for the first time echoes a verisimilar version to that told by the state. Avigur-Rotem creates a double equivalence comparing myth and reality in two distinctive spaces: in Argentina the conflicts of "double" identity and of social marginalization are revealed. In Israel, the dreams of return are confronted with the harsh political and economic difficulties. The "melting pot," idealized once as a social model to unify the nation in both countries, loses its predominance exposing the racial and ethnic mixture which eventually dominated each one of these societies.

Lastly, both Hebrew and Spanish are revealed as signs
of society in midst of transformation, languages invaded by foreign words which testify to the migratory origin. Avigur-Rotem and Dujovne Ortiz use the linguistic distance in order to reflect on the past and recreate history weaving it within a wider framework. The dialectics between “us” and “them”, differences and similarities, allow these authors to claim authorship not only of their individual stories but also of the canonic history which excluded them previously as female immigrants and daughters to Jewish parents. For Dujovne Ortiz, crossing national borders is a necessary act not just during the migratory experience (thus producing the feeling of virtual and true diaspora); it is also a contemporary and typical attitude which represents current epistemologies. As for Avigur-Rotem, the diasporic feeling reveals the problem of any immigrant, including the Jewish newcomers in Israel, since it remits to the challenges and hardship of learning a new language and adapting to new social codes. On the one hand, the nostalgic feeling alludes to the characters’ lost home left behind in Europe. On the other, it recalls Argentina, thus, expressing a new desire: with the return to the biblical land, the Diaspora is recognized as another nostalgic “lost paradise” when the effect of departure is remembered.

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