

## **Gender Relationships in Latin America: Mario Vargas Llosa's *Death in the Andes***

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Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *Death in the Andes*, reflects many aspects of Latin American culture, while at the same time suggesting solutions to some of its problems. The role of women in Latin America is one such area on which the author comments. The story of Tomás and Mercedes provides a thoughtful analysis of and challenge to Latin American stereotypes regarding gender and power.

In the early days of Spanish conquest, few women accompanied the male warriors. Most Spaniards thought that the presence of women might be a distraction and would diminish the intensity and violence necessary for domination of the natives, but men found brides among these natives to satisfy the void (Merrel 109). Once the conquistadors dominated the land, Spain turned to the task of permanently establishing its empire and became aware of the need for Spanish women in the new colonies. As Floyd Merrel explains, women provided the stabilizing force needed to counteract the still adventurous, restless spirit of the men. As a result, the cities, roads, and bridges of Latin America were built in a relatively peaceful colonial era (110).

The Spanish colonizers expected this stability provided by the women as an integral part of the sexist stereotype that still prevails in Latin America. Merrel points out that just as in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the woman was responsible for staying home and keeping everything under control while her husband heedlessly pursued his dreams and ambitions (111). In this way, the demands of Spanish society led to the development of the code of *marianismo*, a phenomenon that implies the imitation of the Virgin Mary in a woman's life. Men saw women as spiritually and morally superior to themselves, but physically and intellectually inferior, thus implying female inferiority in the socio-political realm as well as in family relationships. Following this set of standards resulted ideally in women leading lives of purity, marital faithfulness, self-sacrifice, patient suffering, and total submission to men (Skidmore and Smith 62-63; Merrel 114). A good Latino woman would sacrifice everything for her family and tolerate the behavior of her husband even in abusive situations (Merrel 115).

Latin American men followed the stereotypical pattern of *machismo*, *marianismo*'s counterpart, by expressing their masculinity through violence, aggression, pride, and dominance over women, including sexual exploitation (Merrel ). Skidmore and Smith trace this image of the brave, fearless male to chivalry in the middle ages; indubitably, the success experienced by the conquistadores strengthened that notion ( ).

In colonial Peru, the presence of Islamic culture widened the gender gap even further. Many Muslims migrated with the Spaniards to Latin America in colonial days, fleeing the persecution of the Iberian Peninsula, and Peru was their most popular destination. The Muslims greatly influenced food, politics, dress, and architecture in Spanish settlements in Peru; Lima has even been compared to the famous Al-Andalus of Spain (LAMU). Muslims' beliefs regarding women's subordination, even more so than Catholic *marianismo*, were widespread in cities like Lima, and women typically wore veils, *hijabs*, and long gowns to shield men from their seductive beauty. Interestingly enough, Merrel claims that Peruvian women often used this garb to achieve the opposite effect, maneuvering their veils and tight-fitting dresses to flirt with men while maintaining a mysterious distance that drove men crazy (111). Eventually, the Catholics persecuted the Moors so much in their new home that they had to go into hiding again, but these Muslims had already permanently influenced Peruvian culture.

Of course, the submissive role of women in Latin America changed greatly in the twentieth century, but to a lesser extent than in the United States; while women in the U.S. could vote in

1920, Peruvian women had to wait another fifty-five years for suffrage. The limits imposed by *marianismo* have gradually loosened since colonial days, but only recently have women become actively involved in politics and in the workplaces of Latin America. The presence of this “modern” woman, explains Merrel, creates tension with the traditional image of *marianismo* (115).

As Vargas Llosa shows, the concept of women’s inferiority is still widespread among men. At the very beginning of Tomás’s story in *Death in the Andes*, the author presents the reader with a scene of a man subduing a woman forcefully. The drug-dealer uses this inferior being as he desires, expecting her to endure the suffering. This view of a woman as no more than an object for a man’s enjoyment is repeated in the novel in the characters of Corporal Lituma, the godfather, and of Fats Iscariote.

Tomás, however, is a different story. He objects to such an extreme view of women’s inferiority, and acting on this attitude, he kills Mercedes’s abuser. Later, he admits that love and envy were dominant motives, but nonetheless, the first words out of his mouth when he enters the scene are “Don’t hit her anymore, señor” (Vargas Llosa 19). He values women more for their individuality and personality than for the amount of sex they can provide; this view surprises Lituma most as he listens to Tomás’ story. While he describes his feelings of excitement and love for this woman, it becomes clear that even Tomás is not completely free of *machismo* bias. His feeling of duty to protect Mercedes is likely based on a preconception of women as being physically inferior to men. “The women I knew were scared babies, but she had so much nerve,” Tomás explains to Lituma, revealing his surprise at the unexpected boldness of this woman (Vargas Llosa 46).

Mercedes is, in fact, quite different from the *marianistic* model of a woman. Although she does seem to be submissive in the bedroom of her “boyfriend,” she is quite independent in many other aspects of her life. Like the “modern” Latino woman, she rejects ideas of female helplessness and dependence on men, assuring Tomás, “I can take care of myself” (Vargas Llosa 221). She insists on her self-reliance and will not allow herself to become attached to any one man, indicating a rejection of the wife-and-mother stereotype. Her confidence and boldness are so evident that when Lituma meets her, he feels intimidated.

Tomás’s attachment and Mercedes’s fear of commitment can only lead to their separation, but in the last pages of the novel a reunion takes place. In this ending the reader sees a compromise of the traditional and modern ideas of gender relations. Departing from machismo, Tomás rejects the inferiority of women and even exhibits the three *marianistic* qualities of sacrifice, suffering, and submission himself. He sacrifices his integrity, security, and life’s savings for Mercedes; suffers a great deal because of her ingratitude; and displays a degree of submission in his worship of her. This reform of the male attitude by itself, however, does not bring anything more than the pain of a broken heart.

While Mercedes is initially a foil for the *marianistic* ideal, her reconciliation with Tomás comes when she is willing to move towards that ideal, finding moderation. Sacrificing her own interests and suffering a long, dangerous hike to Naccos, she returns to Tomás, ready to beg forgiveness and projecting an image of submission. Her motherly worry for Tomasito’s health is also reminiscent of *marianismo*. She is still modern, wearing a sweater, slacks, and acting in an intimidating and bold manner, but she seems much more gentle and saintly, reminding the reader of the Virgin Mary. The future of these two lovers is not yet certain, but the reader knows that the Civil Guard is sending Tomás to Piura, Mercedes’s hometown, and it is probable that the two will get married there and live happily ever after—but that’s just speculation.

Vargas Llosa’s immediate audience, the people of Latin America, are already familiar with traditional gender stereotypes. The novel implores the reader to question the validity of these prevailing stereotypes and provides an alternate perspective on the role of women in society.

Through the characterization and plot development of *Death in the Andes*, Vargas Llosa suggests the possibility of a rewarding coexistence between man and woman in modern Peru.

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