

Beyond Gender

- Elena Poinatowska

By Elvira Hernandez Carballido for Isis Internacional-Santiago Chile

Elena Poinatowska is an institution in Mexico. Of Polish origin she has spent her entire life in Mexico and therefore, feels totally Mexican. Her books have been translated into different languages and her newest book, *Tinisima*, a historical novel on the life of the famous Italian photographer and revolutionary, *Tina Modotti*, has already received raves, and criticisms as well, thanks to her passion and courage that imprints all that she undertakes and writes about. (At our request) the Mexican journalist *Elvira Hernandez Carballido* spoke to her. Here is what she has to say.

"Men can be bad no matter if they are foreigners or Mexicans. They are one in the same. They all beat [women]. They are like the lion when in pursuit of a conquest, they fawn, lick the female and seek her out. But once he has her in his claws he is aggressive and mauls her. That's the way men are...That's why I have never liked the idea of the hunt. It's better to be alone and do without than have to put up with a husband. I personally don't need men, nor do I like them, as matter of fact they irritate me, even if they are not even near me."

This is a fragment of our interview with the author of

Hasta no Verte Jesus Mio, the book which is considered a major literary inspiration as stated by the critic, *Ermilio Areu Gomez*-she has created in a frolic, simply a frolic, one of the most masterful works in modern Mexican literature.

Since publishing her first book, in 1954, she has gained notoriety and wide recognition. Few were the women who published in those days, that is why she receives with great pride the new generation of women writers. She recognizes that in the last decades (80's and 90's) "women have returned to the calling that has always belonged to them; to

write, and this is not due to the feminist movement but to those women who each day dedicate themselves to working for themselves, who think of their professional desires and who struggle with great intensity to accomplish them."

A passionate act

For her, writing is more like an act of passion and uncertainty that represents all the possibilities "of documenting the country", she does not believe that there are any writers who are in a specified manner feminine. "I love women very much, I feel a great sense of sisterhood



Elena Poinatowska

towards women and that is why women always form main characters in my books but not because of that can you call it feminine literature, or writing that is exclusive for each sex."

"Women's writing is not feminine literature, it's a diverse kind of literature, with commitment to those without protection." She cites her conference of the Women Writers Congress as an example; "The actual literature of women comes out of the great flow of literature of the oppressed, those without land, the poor, the ones with no voice".

With great firmness she affirms and reaffirms, without any doubt in her response, that there is no such thing as a feminine only writer, but "I do believe that women have the ability to develop certain themes that men have not learned how to shape in their works with the same success. Furthermore, I do not believe that the gender is what inspires writers, it is the individual, human disposition."

She adds that "even though literature by women is reaping splendid moments, it is still part of the voice of the oppressed, the minorities and the enormous silent majority. What would have become of us with out Sappho, or Virginia Woolf, or Simone Weil in our trail, and with us is Marguerite Yourcenar, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag and Sylvia Plath. If in Latin America Juana Ines de la Cruz covers three centuries of silence, behind her others surfaced such as, Gabriela Mistral, Victoria Ocampo, Maria Luisa Bombal, Teresa de Parra and our own, Rosario

Castellanos".

In the past few years we also have names and books written by women worth noting, Poinatowska mentions Silvia Molina, Angeles Mastretta, Maria Luis Puga, Alicia Trueba, Rosa Nissan, Barbara Jacobs, Laura Esquivel, among many others. Such is her pride that she has not hesitated to write the prologues, book covers, or comments on the works of these women. For example in *Like Water for Chocolate* she says:

for *Chocolate*, a novel that dishes out monthly recipes, loves, and household remedies has never been seen in the valley of tears of Mexican literature, because even the men are criers, except Jorge Ibarguengotita, all take themselves terribly serious and sweat beads of solemnity."

"I began to read it in a bad frame of mind, the heavy manuscript of more that 200 pages weighing down my knees. After page 15 time just flew and after completing it, I was blessing Laura Esquivel, I



Elena Poinatowska

"As women we tend to write about sadness and be solemn. In part, Jose Joaquin Blanco was correct when he said that Rosario Castellanos was handkerchief poetry. We are numbed by nostalgia, stiffened by memories, overtaken by the everyday routine that covers all with it's gray powder. We could never state that one of the literary characteristics of Angelina Muniz, Elena Garro, Ines Arredondo, Julieta Campos is happiness."

"But a book such as *Like Water*

covered her with kisses, I wanted to know her (the character in the book), marry her, weep tears of happiness over the finely chopped onions, enjoy the aroma of her cooking, know the innermost part her life recipes, chop spices, peel garlic and wash chilies."

Source: Story and photos from *Mujeres en Accion*, 2-3/94 Isis International, Chile, Casilla 2067, Correo Central, Santiago, Chile. Translated by Luz Maria Martinez, Isis International Manila.