

# Breaking the Silence in Mercedes Valdivieso's *La brecha* (1961) and *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991)

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Historically, in Chilean literature women have not been afforded the same presence or agency as men. This has been a cause of great concern for Chilean women authors and is something they continue to challenge in contemporary Chilean literature. While in the last century some women authors continued to acquiesce to the androcentric expectations of society which called for representations of women as submissive and obliging, others rebelled and refused to conform to such norms. This article discusses how Mercedes Valdivieso used her first publication, *La brecha* (1961) and her final publication *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991) to question the expectations of women within Chilean society and to encourage renewed perspectives on the matter. It argues that the primary tool adopted by Valdivieso to accomplish this goal is to give her protagonists a voice allowing them to express opinions on the situations in which they find themselves. With this voice they also criticise generally accepted assumptions such as women's supposedly innate responsibility for original sin and also the double standards that exist between men and women's approach to sex.

This article will analyse how Mercedes Valdivieso's novels *La brecha* (1961), set in the time it was published, and *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991), set in the seventeenth century, provide subjectivity to their female protagonists through giving them a voice and allowing them to narrate their story from their own perspective. The novels chosen are the first and last publications of the author and are representative of her career-long preoccupation for women's place in society. Each explores their protagonists' reaction to the traditions with which they are forced to contend. Through the voices of her protagonists, Valdivieso demonstrates her disquiet with the position in which women often find themselves due to the norms of society. By virtue of their female agency she actively criticises common expectations for women such as motherhood and marriage, while also seeking to provide a re-visioning of the double standard that exists between men and women when referring to sexual liberty and also the innate blame imposed upon women as descendants of Eve. Joanna O Connell claims that the writing of many "Latin American women writers, both emerges from [...] [an] androcentric tradition and responds critically to its denial of female subjectivity and agency" (Connell 1995, 4). As a self-proclaimed feminist author Valdivieso stated, "Hay una ausencia total de la

mujer en nuestra historia patria" (Zerán 1991, 5). She saw the need to assert female agency through her writing. Sally Robinson has suggested subjectivity is "not a 'being' but a 'doing', both product and process at once" (Tierno-Tello 1993, 35). Julieta Kirwood acknowledges this need in feminist activism:

El feminismo no nació hecho: se está haciendo, constituyéndose a sí mismo en su propia acción con la perspectiva de su futuro virtual y ubicándose en esa nueva forma de relación que excluya tanto la discriminación sexista como todo lo que se ha construido en su entorno (Kirkwood 2010, 59).

Valdivieso's 'doing' materialised in the form of novels wherein she created strong women protagonists who dared to transgress the predetermined roles of women in society. Their defiance of tradition is highlighted through the voice they are afforded by the author. This article will suggest that even though the author's productions served to further the woman's cause in an androcentric society, the author fails to create the "sujeto múltiple" (Aguirre 2008, 22) which has various facets including social class, generation, and ethnic affiliation. Ana María Stiven and Joaquín Fernandois correctly suggest "No existe *la perspectiva femenina*" (Stiven and Fernandois 2011, 12). In reference to her texts Valdivieso claims to speak on behalf of women of her generation. This statement fails to acknowledge the complex structure of identities of women in Chilean society.

Valdivieso knew the effect she wanted to achieve through her work: "Recuperar a las mujeres de la tradición oral, aprenderlas y aprehenderlas nos crecerá a los chilenos con la otra mitad de la historia que nos falta" (Valdivieso 2008, 267). Stiven and Fernandois state that historically, Chilean women were not given centre stage in texts and rather: "Su palabra, su voz, su intimidad, sólo aparecían para dar luz a un relato en el cual ellas no eran más que el trasfondo o el contexto" (Stiven and Fernandois 2011, 14). Speaking in 1989, Valdivieso shared the difficulties faced by women writers of her generation: "Aunque a las mujeres nos estaba permitido escribir, éste era un escribir acondicionado a un lenguaje que nos hacía mujeres y que nos mentía acerca de nuestras propias aspiraciones, nuestro cuerpo y nuestras emociones" (Guerra 2008, 31-32). Having been conditioned by the patriarchal order for so long, it was difficult to express their desires through this medium. Published in 1961, *La brecha*, was hailed as the first Latin American feminist novel. Angélica Rivera describes it as: "la historia de una mujer que, rechazando lo tradicional, opta por una forma de vida que no incluye el matrimonio ni lo establecido" (Rivera 1991, 28). In this text, Valdivieso uses her unnamed protagonist to voice and instigate rejection of norms imposed upon her as a woman in a male-dominated society. With this publication the author joined her woman contemporaries in the

struggle to make women's voices heard and to change the attitude towards them. At this time *La brecha's* message was reinforced with the publication of the magazine *Paula* which discussed in detail feminist issues which were considered taboo within the conservative society that it was published. Amanda Puz, editor of *Paula*, asserts "Luchar por valores menos materialistas, conseguir más permisividad, criticar la autoridad, cuestionar lo establecido, liberalizar las leyes del divorcio y del aborto. Tal era el panorama que nos presentaba el mundo" (Puz 2008, 248). Paying tribute to this renowned Chilean writer following her death in 1993, Sonia Montecino mentions other achievements of Valdivieso in her article 'Mercedes Valdivieso. Escritura y Vida' (Montecino 1993). In addition to publishing *La brecha*, the author also contributed to the feminist cause in Chile during the 1960s assuming the position of editor of *Adán*, published by Zig-Zag editorial company. This was a satirical magazine aimed at men in Latin America to encourage a change in their attitude towards women. She also published three more novels, *La tierra que les dí* (Valdivieso 1963), *Los ojos de bambú* (Valdivieso 1964), and *Las noches y un día* (Valdivieso 1971) between the two publications examined in this article. Her career-long devotion to women continued through her academic work in Rice University in the United States. During the 1980s she made several trips back to Chile. During one of these trips "dirigió el primer Taller de Escritura Femenina en el antiguo Circulo de la creación y reflexion literarias" (Montecino 1993). This was attended by prominent women writers in Chile today such as Diamela Eltit and Nelly Richard.

*La brecha* shocked many readers with the rupture it created between traditional roles and expectations for women and the reality faced by the protagonist. Such controversy was correctly anticipated and Mercedes Valenzuela, as she was known then:

firmó con su apellido de casada de entonces, Valdivieso. Porque de acuerdo con Jaime, su marido, los lectores no tomarían tan a la tremenda ese feminismo desplegado en la novela, y que en los años sesenta eran cosas de desvergonzadas o lesbianas (Rivera 1991, 28)

Seeking refuge behind her husband's surname seems to contradict the very essence of her novel; however, Valdivieso stated that publishing the book alone was enough to get her point across: "hay épocas en la vida en que hay que ser sabio. Yo no claudiqué del hecho de querer ser yo misma, bastaba con el libro" (Figueroa 1989, A6). The first line of the text already provokes the desired reaction from the reader when the protagonist states with little enthusiasm: "Me casé como todo el mundo se casa" (Valdivieso 1991a, 13). From a young age, she has been prepared for this marriage as if it is something necessary and

inevitable. Her maternal grandmother insists: “Eres mujer y aprenderás a zurcir y a estar quieta; nadie querrá que a los diez días de casada te devuelvan por inútil” (Valdivieso 1991a, 14). Oppressed by the female members of her family, the protagonist views marriage as an opportunity to escape. However, she quickly realises the implications that marriage has for her as a woman. “Dejé de pertenecerme por fuera y me amurallé por dentro. La libertad esperada ingenuamente a la vuelta del contrato matrimonial se hacía lejana” (Valdivieso 1991a, 21). Having married at twenty, the protagonist is still quite young and inexperienced enough to accept the marital contract without analysing the ramifications of this action for her, and her freedom. She is shocked by the expectations she must live up to during the honeymoon. Her world seems to fall apart around her when she receives word that she is expecting a child.

Chilean society at the time this novel was published taught women to value motherhood as something to celebrate and welcome. Sonia Montecino asserts that this view has not changed, even in contemporary Chile (Montecino 2008, 402). Valdivieso's protagonist, however, cannot come to terms with the changes this will implicate in her body and her life. She enters into a depression while expecting Sebastián, her only son. The author herself claimed: “La imagen de la mujer era una imagen social desvalorizada. La mujer tenía que ser la madre sufriente, la esposa abnegada, fina, sus modales no podían ser toscos” (Zerán 1991). *La brecha's* protagonist refuses to conform to such views, although she is quiet and submissive as she suffers from depression prior to giving birth. After the birth of her son she realises this is not the life for her and that she never wants to give birth again. “Apreté las manos contra mi vientre sobre las sábanas: ‘Nunca más. Haré lo necesario para impedir que esto se vuelva a repetir. Nunca más’” (Valdivieso 1991a, 34). The rupture between the protagonist and her husband, coupled with that between her actions and the assumptions of patriarchal society continue to grow and develop a tension that becomes unbearable to both husband and wife. Gastón, her husband, declares: “Pensaba que mi mujer debería ser como las que conocí en mi familia, viviendo para su hogar” (Valdivieso 1991a, 66). He sees himself as the victim in their marriage as though she has betrayed him and his expectations. The protagonist on the other hand, eventually asserts her independence and belief stating: “Te lo repito y en definitiva: terminar con eso. No respeto lo que tú respetas; tu fórmula matrimonial es una garra, es dominio, [...] y no me gusta” (Valdivieso 1991a, 67). She voices her disinterest in and disdain for his formula for marriage wherein she is expected to perform certain duties that do not appeal to her.

The fact that the protagonist voices her discontent with her situation is quite a breakthrough. According to her grandmother, she should be quiet and submissive. Gastón himself feels let down by her willingness to share her disquiet with him and others. The protagonist: “[se ve] contenta, haciendo reflexiones sobre la libertad. Eso fue lo terrible para una sociedad en que se suponía que la mujer tenía que estar sometida y si levantaba la voz era peligroso” (Foxley 1989, 5). It is her resistance to the silence imposed upon her that allows Valdivieso’s protagonist to truly breach societal norms and push for another existence. In her theorising, Kirkwood called for a new identity to be forged for women, that of a person, separate from her identity as wife and mother. Her means to achieve this was “pensar disidentemente en cuanto mujer” (Patricia 1992, 58). Through *La brecha*, Valdivieso had already started to encourage such change in attitude twenty years prior to Kirkwood’s call. The author describes the triumph of her debut novel: “[e]l mérito está en que yo me atreví a contar lo que pasaba, es decir, a hablar desde la mujer. Las mujeres en general, hasta *La brecha*, hablaban desde la mirada que sobre ellas tienen los otros” (Zerán 1991, 4). This is an idyllic vision of the significance of her work held by the author, but this claim to speak for all women is not really supported by the text itself, wherein other facets of identity such as social class and ethnicity are not considered. The ramifications of such an omission will be discussed in detail later in the article.

Valdivieso’s protagonist in her 1991 publication also transgressed societal norms for women. For the author, *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, served to extend the arguments that she brought forward with *La brecha*, while maintaining a focus on women’s voices and their subjectivity. This publication saw a return to the colonial era, to a reworking of seventeenth-century historical figure Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer (1604?-1665). As a member of the Chilean oligarchy, Catalina was a particularly powerful woman for her time. In oral tradition and more recent written accounts, la Quintrala (as she is more commonly known) is most renowned as an evil woman who is suspected of committing approximately forty murders in her life. Even more surprising is the fact that she was never convicted of any of these murders. Olga Grau Duhart explains the strength of using this character to provide renewed representations in contemporary Chile: “Una de las primeras evidencias de su fuerza semántica es que el mito ha sido recuperado y reinstalado en distintos momentos de la historia literaria, cultural y política de nuestro país, entendidos como contextos históricos de su reproducción significativa” (Duhart 2008, 491). Very little is recorded in historical accounts about this figure, and until the nineteenth century, her story was readily diffused through oral tradition.

Since then, a number of versions of Quintrala's story have been published, each with a different motive. Two texts in particular which describe Quintrala's life and were produced prior to *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, stand out from other productions. Nineteenth century Chilean historian, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna published his historical text, *Los Lisperguer y la Quintrala* in 1877 and Magdalena Petit presented her novel, *La Quintrala* in 1932.

In his text, Vicuña Mackenna claims to provide an objective and truthful account of Quintrala's life. This text was offered as part of the nation-building effort that took place during the nineteenth century, which was a time for imagining the participants in the recently-established independent nation. In fact what Vicuña Mackenna does is offer Quintrala as an example of what is degenerate with the Chilean nation. He suggests her gender and her mixed heritage, are possible reasons for her malevolent behaviour:

conviene notar desde luego, que, aparte de la educación viciosa, de los malos ejemplos del hogar y de las propensiones generatrices de su ser y de su sexo, tuvo doña Catalina de los Ríos una extraña mixtión de sangre, porque, si por su padre y su abuela, la Encío, era de estirpe genuina de España, por su madre doña Catalina Lisperguer y Flores (Blumen) era dos veces alemana y una vez india chilena. [...] ¿Había en esta mezcla de razas fundidas rápidamente en un solo tipo algo que predisponía al crimen y al mal? (Mackenna 1972, 79)

Vicuña Mackenna's text is a misogynistic account of Quintrala's life and feeds into the patriarchal views of women of the time who sought to transgress the predetermined boundaries of society. If Quintrala did carry out all the crimes as described then certainly one may find it difficult to feel pity for her, but it seems quite an extraordinary claim to suggest that her behaviour is as a direct result of being a *mestiza* woman. Petit's early twentieth-century text *La Quintrala* is also worth noting before referring to *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*. Petit was the first woman author to provide an account of la Quintrala's life. The influence of Vicuña Mackenna's text is quite evident in Petit's narrative and a similar stance is adopted when referring to Quintrala's behaviour. For present day readers, it is disappointing to see Petit falling into the same patriarchal pitfalls as previous authors and not challenging the conventional interpretation.

In consideration of the texts published prior to 1991, Valdivieso took up the challenge to question conventional portrayals and provide a re-visioning of la Quintrala. Her text enters into dialogue with Vicuña Mackenna's, in particular, questioning its validity. Mariechien Euler Carmona states that: "Valdivieso crea personajes femeninos que rompen con visiones canónicas, en la medida en que se apartan de los roles tradicionales y exploran vivencias que rompen con el orden patriarcal" (Carmona 1999, 343), this is true of the protagonist of *Maldita*

*yo entre las mujeres*. In previous texts, Quintrala is objectified. Her perspective is not provided. As is true of many women, she was not given a voice in historical accounts. Valdivieso believed in the importance of women and claimed: “Uno de mis proyectos más queridos es recuperar una memoria de mujeres, rescatarlas del olvido” (Rivera 1991, 28). In providing an atypical reading of Quintrala, Valdivieso seeks to de-mythify her protagonist and her life. Andrea Puyol suggests that Valdivieso’s portrayal has a humanizing effect on the protagonist (Puyol 1991, 88). A principal strategy which the author adopts in order to provide this alternative, de-mythified reading is to give Catalina a voice. “Catalina” is used here in reference to Valdivieso’s protagonist because unlike previous texts, *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* rarely refers to her as Quintrala, placing the emphasis on her real name, serving to further exemplify the protagonist’s human traits.

*La brecha*’s protagonist is given the opportunity to narrate her story, unhindered by an omnipresent narrator who is removed from the situation. One experiences the events of the novel through her eyes only and it is only through direct speech quoted by her that it is possible to focus on the perspectives of the secondary characters. This honest and direct approach of the protagonist allows the reader to gain confidence in her version of events. This technique was not a viable one for Valdivieso when writing *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*. Until the publication of this text, la Quintrala had been portrayed as an object rather than the subject of the narrative. To give her a voice and allow her to narrate her experiences would not be accepted without criticism since for three centuries hers was a tale of caution to Chilean women. The author sought to deconstruct this common belief and create a new perspective. She rewrote the myth from a new angle which demanded a re-questioning of the story and its origins. O Connell suggests that: “Feminist rewriting can [...] be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction—of bringing into being enabling alternatives” (Connell 1995, 30). In her 1991 publication, Mercedes Valdivieso succeeds in positioning her text in both of these categories. This is clear in the narrative form that is adopted for the novel. The text opens with a fictitious letter written by the governor of Chile, Alonso de Ribera, to the Spanish Viceroy in Lima. In it he describes the development of Chile under Spanish rule in the seventeenth century, and he also introduces Catalina, the protagonist, and some of the female members of the family. The remainder of the text is then divided into fourteen parts, ten of which are narrated by Catalina and four which begin with “Dicen que...”.

The author acknowledges the difficulty in trying to provide a new portrayal of Quintrala stating: “Es como retomar una voz femenina que ha sido bastante maldita, si usted la reflexiona. Ha estado postergada, sumergida, hablada con una voz ajena” (Maack 1991). The frustration of not previously being given a voice is clear in Catalina’s reaction to her family making decisions about her life without consulting her: “Me enfurecía escucharles disponer de mi vida y una tarde grité a mis padres que nadie a mí me casaba mientras a mi cuerpo no le diera ganas” (Valdivieso 1991b, 18). By giving this voice to Catalina, Valdivieso responds to three centuries of the protagonist’s story being told from a patriarchal and supposedly objective perspective which was not concerned with how Catalina may have felt or thought. Frustration with this reality is expressed in the protagonist’s exclamation: “¡Quiero ser mía!” (Valdivieso 1991b, 17). The heteroglossic structure in the novel aids Valdivieso greatly in demolishing the previous accounts of Quintrala’s story while simultaneously constructing an alternative perspective. Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as “a process that enables the mapping of discourses as their contours are outlined in relation to each other, and which thus relativises any claim to a monopoly” (Sellers 2001, 43). Catalina’s voice is dominant in the text and is afforded authority through juxtaposition with the sections beginning with “dicen que...”. Norberto Flores suggests that “[b]y putting history into the mouths of the ignored [...] Valdivieso creates a polyphony of voices that reveals the invalidity of a discourse that has erected itself as truth bearing” (Flores 1995, 283). Valdivieso admitted she chose to write a fictional portrayal of Quintrala because “ella representa para mí una fuerza femenina que luchó tanto por manifestarse y fue muy mal recibida. Contra ella ha habido un enorme prejuicio” (Rivera 1991, 28). Critics such as Flores and Rosa Sarabia agree that the sections beginning with “dicen que...” are paramount to aiding the reliability of Catalina’s own narrative. They represent the rumours and popular myths of Quintrala’s tale which was reproduced by oral tradition and authors who published before Valdivieso. In creating a heteroglossic narrative, Valdivieso cleverly calls into question the legitimacy of one “official” account of a tale and also casts doubt on the previous representations. Flores suggests that “[by] introducing the female voice in the monolithic context of patriarchal discourse, Mercedes Valdivieso questions the validity of history, denouncing its feeble condition as a linguistic construct” (Flores 1995, 279). Sarabia coincides with this belief stating that the “dicen que...” narrative “a pesar de su distancia no logra poseer fiabilidad y objetividad por contrapeso a la seducción que ofrece la primera, la de Catalina, quien domina el resto de la narración” (Sarabia 2000, 43).

The “dicen que...” narrative portrays only negative opinions of Quintrala, “no cupo dudas de que el diablo tenía su voluntad en ella” (Valdivieso 1991b, 77). When contrasted with the first person narrative, this viewpoint raises suspicion and does not seem to hold the same weight it did previously. Bernadita Llanos correctly asserts: “Valdivieso cuestiona el papel de los diversos discursos históricos de la época en la creación de la leyenda” (Llanos 1994, 1027). This, as Rebecca Lee states, helps render Catalina as a more sympathetic character (Lee 2007, 114). Valdivieso’s text represents an upheaval of the traditional perspective of its protagonist. Having been condemned to silence by previous authors, Valdivieso’s Catalina is finally given the opportunity to speak and provide her version of events which, the reader soon discovers, is quite contrasting to other versions. Allowing Catalina the subjectivity to defend her situation has a surprising effect on the reader. Having always been painted in a particularly negative light, it seems unusual that a text could invoke pity for such a character. The text succeeds in doing just that. Not only does Catalina’s voice undermine popular and official discourses which were previously accepted uncritically, it also encourages an approximation between reader and protagonist which would not have been imagined before.

Through both novels, Mercedes Valdivieso criticises certain common beliefs about women, their role, and their behaviour. Since this article is interested particularly in how the protagonists reject the limiting roles afforded to them by the patriarchal order, through their own subjectivity and voice, the following two examples of such restrictions are particularly interesting to analyse. Firstly society’s belief that women are descendants of Eve and so are responsible for original sin, and secondly the double standard that exists between men and women in reference to sexual activity. In her text, *From Beast to Blonde*, Marina Warner refers to women’s supposedly innate betrayal of man. By breaking her silence and tempting Adam, Eve brought about the downfall for mankind. According to Warner, it is for that reason that silence has long been considered a female virtue by patriarchal order (Warner 1995, 29). *La brecha’s* protagonist does not possess this so-called female virtue. She explicitly voices her complaints about her situation as a woman and the expectations that are imposed on her due to this fact. Speaking to her conservative childhood friend she states: “–Yo creo que la estamos pagando por Adán y Eva. ¿Cómo sabes si la desobediencia no fue sino la tentación del sexo y Adán cayó incitado por su compañera?” (Valdivieso 1991a, 106). She blames both figures for the difficult roles men and women are forced to act out within society, while failing to question the monolithic assumption that Eve was the source of temptation.

The protagonist in *La brecha* has from an early age shown signs of resistance to conforming to societal norms. Her father reassures her, “Eres como yo, un poco hijo del Diablo; pero no hay que temerle, es positivo, todo el progreso se lo debemos a él” (Valdivieso 1991a, 27). This insinuates the era within which they live is one of severe conservatism, where any transgression of tradition is viewed as an influence of the Devil. The protagonist remembers this conversation with her father, who accepted her as she was, but her father died shortly after this and so she was left to defend her unique outlook on life to most other people. His reference to them as children of the Devil reflects on the story of Adam and Eve, where Eve chose to break the rules and heed the Devil's words. This resulted in the pair eating the apple which made them aware of their surroundings and led them to feel shame of their naked bodies and not to accept explanations which had been provided for them until then. In a sense, they progressed to thinking more critically. In the Bible this is condemned as the work of the Devil, but as the protagonist's father correctly points out, if this is the work of the Devil, the world owes its progress to him. Gastón blames his wife for all that has gone wrong in their relationship. Through her constant rejection and verbal criticism of the patriarchal order and what it has forced upon her she has driven her husband to a point of desperation. Even after agreeing to an annulment of their marriage, he still cannot accept the “*brecha*” that she has created in their relationship and in his world. He informs her that she was “culpable de todo lo que le sucedía, culpable de haber perdido su alma, culpable de que la vida no tuviera ninguna esperanza, ningún camino” (Valdivieso 1991a, 141). This heritage of fault and responsibility is also mentioned by the protagonist when she has left Gastón, and has successfully set up a new life for herself and Sebastián. They have their own home and she has a job in an office to maintain this. She has broken the mould in tradition and has succeeded independently outside of marriage without resorting to prostitution or other illegal activities to maintain their lifestyle. She realises then that in a short number of years, she has fallen victim to both Adam and Eve's legacies: “Ganarás el pan con el sudor de tu frente’. La terrible maldición de Dios al hombre caído. Y a la mujer: ‘Parirás tus hijos con dolor’ [...] ‘Ambas maldiciones me tocan’” (Valdivieso 1991a, 113). Having broken from societal expectations, she has been doubly punished. Although she is criticised in the immediate aftermath for breaking from these expectations, one cannot deny the positive long term outcomes that come from such a “*brecha*”. She has set a precedence for women who find themselves in similar situations. In this 1961 publication, the references to Adam and Eve and the author's questioning of the legitimacy of such blame being afforded to a particular sex as a result of actions carried

out by their predecessors is evident. In *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, this seems to escalate and a focus is placed specifically on Eve.

Warner promotes the rewriting of myths and fairytales from a feminist perspective in order to provide subjectivity for women, which is not afforded to them in patriarchal representations of the mythical woman. She also asserts that according to the patriarchal order: "Eve, the pattern of all women to come, sinned through speech, by tempting Adam to eat with her words. So speech must be denied all her daughters" (Warner 1995, 30). In *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, Fray Cristobal attempts to warn Catalina against her transgressive behaviour choosing Eve as a prime example of behaviour that one should not emulate. He reminds Catalina that women tend towards evil and weakness of character since "mujer fue quien paso la oreja al demonio y en mujer principi6 el pecado" (Valdivieso 1991b, 45-46). Catalina refuses to acquiesce in the face of this imposed generalisation. She displays pride in herself and her origins. This pride and self-assuredness is not valued by a society which prefers women to be seen and not heard. Her continued refusal to conform to social norms results in her receiving much unwanted criticism from male figures in her family and even more frequently from members of the clergy. She is equated with Eve when she and her mother are being questioned about her father's death. Fray Marciano is unimpressed with their unwillingness to comply with the investigation and exclaims: "Eva fue causa del pecado original ejemplo funesto que le sigue" (Valdivieso 1991b, 115). Catalina quickly reminds him that they are all "¡hijos de mujeres!" (Valdivieso 1991b, 115). *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* narrated predominately in the first person female voice serves to counter the traditional belief that women are responsible for much of the evil that is carried out in the world. Not only does it break the silence of historical meta-narratives, but it also breaks the norms of myths and fairytales told about Quintrala which also condemned her to silence. It has taken a step beyond the criticism in *La brecha*, and now seems to disregard any suggestion that one can legitimately argue the position of women in society in reference to Eve's story. The figure of Eve is revealed as a patriarchal and religious scapegoat, used to justify the idea of male superiority over women.

The double standards faced by women in Chilean society also receive Valdivieso's severe criticism in her texts. When women are not being held responsible for leading men astray, they are expected to be sexually subservient and are condemned for any promiscuity. Both Valdivieso's protagonists fall victim to such critical receptions. The author discusses the difficulty that women faced when trying to speak about such issues:

antes había un lenguaje atribuido a la mujer, el de la suavidad y el de la queja pudorosa; a la mujer le asignaron un lenguaje pasado por la censura del hombre. La mujer tenía que ser sensible, amar eternamente, y ser casta (Foxley 1989, 4).

These social norms set out for women confined them to very specific realities where they were not always content. In *La brecha*, the protagonist has no sexual experience prior to marriage and is not convinced by her sexual encounters with Gastón. The consummation of the marriage results in her unwanted pregnancy and throws her into the depths of depression. More disturbing still are the encounters she has when Gastón is battling with jealousy after seeing his wife dance with another man. He refuses to go down for dinner following the episode and insists on reaffirming his apparent dominion over his wife: “¡Mía! ¡Eres mía! La débil posesión a través del sexo” (Valdivieso 1991a, 18). Of course, this event says more about Gastón’s personal issues about his sense of self and entitlement over his wife rather than what it says about the protagonist. It does lead the reader to feel pity for her in the situation in which she, like many may have found themselves. Even though Gastón clearly is not comfortable with their separation and tends to spend more time out of their home than in it, he refuses to let his marriage fail. “¿Supones que yo aceptaré haber fracasado en mi matrimonio? Seguiremos juntos aunque sea necesario darte de bofetadas” (Valdivieso 1991a, 54). This remark reflects the tendency to resort to gender violence in the *machista* culture within which they are living, and unfortunately is an attitude that remains in contemporary society in Chile and elsewhere. There is no love lost between husband and wife, but since it is the protagonist, his wife, who has requested the separation, he will not agree to it. Divorce was still a taboo issue in Chile during this time and so the protagonist’s suggestion would not have been met kindly. In an attempt to alleviate her daily struggle with depression and motherhood, the protagonist joins a drama group where she meets like-minded people. This is also a space for her outside the home where she is not defined solely by her husband and the function she has in their home. This type of freedom is not the norm and Gastón, knowing that she is unhappy with her situation as mother and wife still insists: “Tendremos más hijos, abandonarás cosas tan absurdas como el teatro, no te visitará gente con la que nada tengo que ver, dejarás de lado lo que impide que seamos felices” (Valdivieso 1991a, 66). He sees her actions as impeding his happiness and cannot even conceive the possibility that she may have different things that make her happy as an individual. In his eyes, if he is happy, they must both be happy. In saying this he attempts to dismiss any subjectivity which his wife may try to assert in her self-discovery which neither desires nor requires him to be fulfilled.

The protagonists of both novels seek to assert their “[l]ibertad” (Valdivieso 1991a, 142) through sexual encounters with more than one man. They question the double standard that remains in patriarchal society today which celebrates the virility of a man with several sexual partners while a woman in a similar position is heavily criticised. *La brecha*'s protagonist questions this stating: “pero la vanidad masculina es ciega: las mujeres se entregan por amor o se prostituyen por dinero. Casos extremos. ¿Y el término medio? ¿Una mezcla de amor y prostitución, de prostitución y amor?” (Valdivieso 1991a, 58). Aware that she does not want to spend the rest of her life with Gastón, she embarks upon sexual relations with other men. She cares for the men but does not agree with the idea that in order for a woman to have sex it must either be out of love or because she is being paid for it. Her direct remark regarding this is shocking in the sense that it highlights just how blatant and extreme society's view is on this topic. In *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, Catalina's attitude towards sexual activity is moderated from previous portrayals of the protagonist. In traditional myths Quintrala's lustful ways and so-called sexual perversion is condemned. Valdivieso's re-visioning of the narrative portrays its protagonist as a sexual being, certainly, but does not emphasise it as something unnatural. Catalina defends her actions against Enrique Enríquez, whom she supposedly murdered, claiming that he had dishonoured her integrity while speaking with his friends: “habló de mi lascivia y de cómo él me la gastaría y sobrado” (Valdivieso 1991b, 15) and she also claims that: “[Enriquéz] gozó imaginándome desnuda, reducida a lo que soy, una hembra para el gozo y olvido” (Valdivieso 1991b, 19). Catalina's words underline the objectification to which women are subjected, even in contemporary society. The acknowledgement of this objectification demands a more sympathetic relation between reader and protagonist. Valdivieso insists on her strategy of providing a voice to Catalina as a necessary element to understanding her. Having always been referred to in negative terms, the author seeks to reappropriate Catalina's life, giving her a voice which allows her to explain her actions. It is surprising the alluring qualities that a first person narrative can have on the reader.

It is through her protagonists' voices that Valdivieso asserted female agency and rescued women from their traditional silence. The unnamed protagonist from *La brecha* is just that, unnamed. The author used this technique to allow this character be a widely-accepted representative of women from her generation. In the epigraph to the novel she claims “*El personaje de esta novela no tiene nombre, pero podría ser el de cualquier mujer de nuestra generación*” (Valdivieso 1991a). The voice of the nameless protagonist gains even more relevance when this is revealed as the female reader senses a common channel

between her life and that of the protagonist. However, this idea of representing women of her generation through her unidentified protagonist is also a problematic step for Valdivieso. It blindly assumes the idea, which Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against, that all women are oppressed in the same way, regardless of age, socio-economic circumstances and ethnicity (Mohanty 1994, 196-197). Lucía Guerra too insists that

[r]eaccionando contra el esencialismo de los nuevos discursos feministas producidos en los sectores hegemónicos, la mujer latinoamericana se busca a sí misma en una otredad múltiple y se propone reemplazar la teorización abstracta por multidiálogos que portan en sí una potencialidad política (Guerra 2006, 33)

This is not the case in *La brecha*, and although the author's intention is honourable, it is somewhat uncritical and unrealistic in its delivery. The protagonist is of a middle- to upper-class standing where she is expected not to work, but rather devote her time to making and maintaining a home. In these responsibilities she has help from her "empleada" who not only helps with the upkeep of the house, but also with the care of Sebastián. On her way to catch her flight to New York she states: "Besé a Sebastián dormido, lo recomendé a la empleada y partí a pie" (Valdivieso 1991a, 95). Her responsibility towards her son is conferred to the "empleada" who is not given a voice in the text and so the reader is unaware of her situation and how she feels about it. On occasions throughout the text, "la empleada" takes on the responsibility of childminder and housekeeper while the protagonist has the opportunity to analyse the situation she is in and to take action to change it. Her employee is not afforded such a luxury. At no point in the text is any female character, except the protagonist, encouraged to rebel against her oppressive circumstances. For this reason, one needs to be cautious in celebrating this text as universally relevant to women. It is relevant to women of similar socio-economic positions, but its elitist tendencies restrict it from becoming relevant to a wider group of women.

Similarly in *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, a special focus is placed on the women in Catalina's family. She has received her *mestiza* heritage matrilineally, which Vicuña Mackenna originally argued was the cause of her evil actions, and so in Valdivieso's publication, there seems to be a particular interest in re-writing the negative portrayals to which these women were previously subjected. In light of this, they are depicted in less barbaric terms. Catalina's grandmother is even given the opportunity to express the reality the women of their family face as *mestiza* women, "Doña Águeda contestó que eso era ser mujer primero y también, mujer cruzada por dos destinos, lo que era ser mujer dos veces" (Valdivieso 1991b, 37). This suggests that the women in the family have been

doubly distanced from the centres of power on the grounds of gender and ethnicity. Valdivieso's text inverts this injustice by bringing the female members of Catalina's family to the forefront and marginalising the male European descendants who share the same blood but are more readily accepted as Spanish. Focus remains on the women of Catalina's family, and little or no subjectivity is given to other female characters in the text. La Tatamai, who is an indigenous servant and has served all the generations of Lisperguer women, is given a certain status within their world. She is valued for her natural potions and wise sayings. She too verbally criticises the dominance men have over women: "Los hombres pueden darse el lujo de sus ganas y una mujer pagará por ellos" (Valdivieso 1991b, 61), but she is not provided with the same opportunity as the Lisperguer women to assert her subjectivity. Her opinion and actions are respected, but at no point is she encouraged to resist her subordinate position and establish her subjectivity free of her mistresses. Other servants such as Rosario Ay and Perdón del Socorro are scorned for conforming to the duties that the patriarchs assign them. They do not seek to join the Lisperguer women in their quest to corrupt the patriarchal order and indeed, Rosario Ay aids Catalina's father don Gonzálo by spying on his daughter and reporting back to him. She receives heavy criticism for this in Valdivieso's text. Her actions are seen as weak and submissive, and yet she is not provided with an occasion to assert subjectivity. This right is reserved for the Lisperguer women who due to their social status are in a more comfortable position to go against the grain and challenge male domination through voicing rejection of its norms. By doing this they do not risk losing their position in society or basic needs such as a roof over their heads and food on their tables. The risk is much higher for their servants who depend on the dominating men for their livelihood. While successfully criticising the essentialist ideas proposed by patriarchal society regarding the roles of men and women, Valdivieso falls into another essentialist trap claiming to speak for "all" women.

To conclude, Mercedes Valdivieso uses *La brecha* and *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* to portray new perspectives on women and to encourage a dismantling of traditional patriarchal presumptions regarding women and their limited roles in society. Her primary technique in instigating this upheaval of societal values is by providing agency to her protagonists in the form of a voice. Through the first-person female narrative a direct connection is formed between reader and protagonist as one is privy to their opinions and expectations. Valdivieso utilises the voices of her female characters to criticise popular opinion on the expected roles of men and women. In *La brecha* she successfully questions the legitimacy of relegating women to the home as wives

and mothers. It is clear from this novel that these roles are not desired innately by all women and that forcing them to conform to this is not a productive approach. This novel was poorly received by many people due to the honesty and direct perspective it took on taboo issues such as depression and divorce, presented from the female protagonist's perspective. *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* allowed the author to develop arguments which were perhaps more tentatively presented in *La brecha*. Through the voices of their protagonists, both novels sought to legitimise alternative positions for women in society outside of the previously-established boundaries. They promoted the right for women to "pensar disidentemente" (Patricia 1992) and also criticised the unfair presumptions which the church and patriarchal society as a whole has of women as descendants of Eve. Perhaps most successfully, both *La brecha* and *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, both explicitly criticise the double standard applied to women with reference to sexuality. They reject the extreme categories within which women are placed when speaking about sexual relations and demand a more moderate approach to this subject. All the aforementioned aspects are of great importance to the struggle of establishing female subjectivity within literature and providing women with voices to share their perspectives. However, one cannot ignore the oversight which the author seems to have made in relation to other social factors such as ethnicity and socio-economic background in reference to her female characters. By not providing *La brecha's* protagonist with a name, she sought to make her shared experience a more inclusive one. Nonetheless, she simply succeeds in disregarding the very important fact that women are marginalised because of their sex, certainly, but very often other factors such as the ones above are also responsible for their isolation. One cannot assume that all women are oppressed in the same manner and so it is important to bear this in mind when analysing Valdivieso's approach. This caveat does not take from the basic premise of these novels, as though they may be flawed in their presentation, they each add greatly to the discussion of female subjectivity in Chilean fiction from the twentieth century.

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