



Mini Review

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Questioning Justice in Contemporary Mexico: A Critical Review of Martin Solares's *The Black Minutes*

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Introduction

In 1994, French feminist writer Maud Tabachnik shocked the literary establishment in her country with the release of her first polar. *Un Été Pourri* introduces the two main characters of her crime series, namely Detective Sam Goodman from the Boston Police Department, and Sandra Khan, a lesbian journalist. Yet, the main interest of her first novel lies in the gruesome depiction of murders and castrations men suffer in the hands of women in the novel. In an article published as a response to the multiple threats and criticism she faced after the publication of her novel, Tabachnik claimed when it comes to torturing, abusing, and raping female bodies, male imagination has always been rife and vivid. In her "Remarques sur la non-place des femmes dans le roman noir"¹, Tabachnik advocates a new form of crime fiction that explores violence of women to denounce patriarchy and its collusion with the justice system. The collusion between these two orders contribute to increase the silence on various forms of violence women incur around the world. Whether it is sexual assault, harassment of all kinds, and in some cases prostitution and femicide, women, Tabachnik points out, face the double jeopardy of patriarchal societies that castigate them and a justice system that, in some countries, is totally absent [1].

The issue of the collusion of patriarchy and the justice system

with the aim of dispossessing women from the ability to talk about their experience became the foundation of Tabachnik's work. In her 2005 novel *J'ai Regardé le Diable en face* [2], Tabachnik narrates Sandra Khan's unsuccessful attempt to investigate the numerous killings of young women in Ciudad Juarez. The novel was published as the news of the murders and disappearances of nearly 500 women in this area of Mexico shocked the international community. In addition to doubling down on her favorite theme of violence against women, the novel exposes the limited impact issues affecting women in non-Western communities have on the global conversation on feminism and justice. Beyond the discussion on women's issues and the long-lasting impact of patriarchy in non-Western communities, such a situation as the murders and disappearances of hundreds of women in a country inevitably leads to question the police and its impact of the society it claims to serve. In his first novel, *The Black Minutes*, Martin Solares relies on the murders and disappearances of multiple women in Ciudad Juarez. In this novel, the Mexican writer produces a complex narration that combines to the failure of the Mexican justice system, the impact of organized crime and the cartels, and most important, the struggle of decent people to find existential meaning in the socio-political chaos [3,4].

¹ Maud Tabachnik. "Remarques sur la non-place des femmes dans le roman noir," *Les Temps Modernes*, no 595, 1997, pp. 122-129.

The novel opens with the return of Bernardo Blanco to his native town of Paracuán. A successful investigative journalist in Texas, Blanco is found dead a few days after his return. Through the perspective of multiple characters such as Ramón “el Macetón” (the Flowerpot), the omniscient narrator offers a complex web of police corruption, collusion, and zero accountability. Cabrera discovers that Blanco was writing a book on the killings of five young girls in the 1970s by a man known as The Jackal. To expose the extent of political and judicial corruption surrounding Blanco’s murder and The Jackal’s crimes, Solares constantly changes perspectives, bringing in characters such as detective Vicente Rangel, the original investigator into these murders. As suggested earlier, Solares builds on the murders of young girls to explore the complex judicial system, or the absence of it. In addition to exposing the usual corruption of the political elite, the novel takes the reader into the complex socio-cultural fabric of the author’s nation. The first striking aspect in Solares’s novel includes the invisibility of the female victims. Even though their names and the circumstances of their deaths have become a concern of the Paracuán police department, there is not really much information about them, or their personalities. In his essay “Typologie du Roman Policier”, Tzvetan Todorov describes how a crime novel includes two stories: the first story tells the circumstances of the crime, emphasizing the victim before the crime happens. The second story includes the investigation and the identification of the suspect. In *The Black Minutes*, the narrator does not narrate the murders. Victims disappear and their bodies are found in the street, in a ditch. Such a situation suits the dystopian setting of rampant crime and the lack of effective law enforcement that reflects Solares’s perception of contemporary Mexico. Mexican sociologist Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, in *Trama de una injusticia. Femicidio Sexual Sistémico en Ciudad Juárez* [5], offers a different perception of the invisibility of female victims of murders. She argues that feminicides in Mexico, specifically in Ciudad Juarez, reflect two key issues. First, they portray the existence of a systemic and patriarchal system that marginalizes and legitimizes violence on women. Such a system not only determines the value of a woman through her socio-economic status, but also validates the forms of violence a woman could be subjected. As such, maids, factory workers, or sex workers are viewed as inferior, and their disappearance would not raise any alarm. Monárrez Fragoso concludes that feminicides, far from being the symptoms of an increasing crime rate in Mexico, highlight the Mexican state’s inability to protect its citizens and the growing climate of impunity that has resulted from the influence organized crime and drug cartels have had on the country.

For Melissa Wright, the impact of feminicides in Ciudad Juárez goes beyond the issue of law enforcement or the numerous violations of human rights. In “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border”, this city has become the theater of a new confrontation between the drug cartels and the Mexican army sent to protect the civilian population. Wright argues that Juárez is the center stage of a double political and gender battle. First, the political battle feeds on the belief that the state’s response to cartels will bring peace and tranquility for the population, restoring stability and democracy even though,

second, the increasing number of civilian casualties proves how far both sides, the army and drug lords, are ready to do. Such a scenario turns Mexican people and Mexican women in particular into victims. The arrest and subsequent conviction of René Luz de Dios López, the man dubbed by the judicial system and the press as the Jackal compounds the desperation Mexicans face on a daily. René Luz de Dios López is a salesman whose only crime was to be in Paracuán the days two victims were kidnapped and killed. Despite a strong alibi, he was sentenced to life in prison for the murders. To a degree, the case of this victim of arbitrary police and a corrupt justice system reinforces the sense of invisibility that the writer wants to convey in his work. Solares’s use of such characters questions the usefulness of living in such a dystopian environment, as the confrontation between the army and the cartels continually threatens the social balance, increasing the numbers of disappearances and murders, and questioning the future of the Mexican democracy.

More than questioning the future of democracy in Mexico, *The Black Minutes* could be read as a praise of the average Mexican and their determination to find meaning in a complex and violent situation. In “Radiographies de la Violence”, Solares explores the development of narcoculture, a subculture based and funded by organized crime in Mexico. The genre has invaded Mexican literature and music – among others - and tried to legitimize criminality despite the increasing violence in country, preying on the rampant poverty in rural areas. Solares believes that it is time to restore the lives and struggles of ordinary people, those who resist the temptation of easy money and violence. One of them includes Ramon ‘Maceton’ Cabrera, the detective in charge of solving Bernardo Blanco’s murder. Interestingly, the narrator suggests that Cabrera was chosen by his boss, Chief Taboada, because he is incorruptible. Cabrera represents the traditional detective whose sense of justice disturbs the corrupt system in Paracuán, a system in which his boss plays an important role, as suggested in this passage: “Halfway through the meeting, the chief peered out through the thick blinds that separated his office from the main room, looking over the officers who were present, and picked out the only subordinate who, in his opinion, could still be trusted. That is to say, Ramón ‘Macetón’ Cabrera.” (*The Black Minutes* 13) In this passage, it is safe to imply two facts. First, the narrator describing Cabrera as the only one officer to be trusted in the police station suggests his other colleagues to be either incapable or corrupted. Whatever the case, Chief Taboada has a very low opinion of his subordinates. Second, the narrator’s use of the verb “peering” could indicate that Blanco’s murder disrupts the chief’s *modus operandi* when it comes to solving crimes. The victim is a native Paracuán who turned out to be a successful journalist in the U.S. Blanco’s murder requires an approach different from Taboada’s lack of critical insight. His motto is: “The best police officer is the most arbitrary.” (*The Black Minutes* 168) The chief’s motto, a belief he has held all his career, exposes the hidden arbitrariness of the police force, contrasting with Cabrera’s desire to serve and protect.

Solares’s relies on Cabrera to find the real suspect, but also show how a corrupt system threatens the lives of ordinary Mexicans. Cabrera unveils the mystery surrounding the real Jackal,

why Blanco was killed and how the justice conspired to imprison an innocent and allow the murder to make more victims. Overall, *The Black Minutes* stands out because it dares to write against the rising tide of narcoculture and the dystopian socio-political atmosphere in contemporary Mexico. Solares's purpose lies in not only exploring the limits of the state's war on drugs, but also to remind the readers of the lives of ordinary citizens whose struggle for peace and tranquility should not be overlooked.

Acknowledgement

None

References

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4. The Black Minutes.
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