

Quechuan Voices: The Art of Storytelling through Song



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Abstract: Sarah Anderson examines Claudia Llosa's 2009 film, *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*) for its use of song as a storytelling medium for expressing Quechuan women's rights in Peru. The author argues that Llosa's film represents Quechuan women's healing processes and their desire for liberation from the trauma of rape and the specters of race, class, and gender oppressions experienced during Peru's 1980-2000 Civil War. Anderson explicates the main character Fausta's song for three major symbols of Quechuan knowledge: healing the disease contracted by "the milk of sorrow," with traditional medicinal practices; Quechuan links to traditional food sources and land rights through a potato hidden in Fausta's vagina; and the potato's manifestation into a growing plant as a symbol of hope for indigenous Quechuan assertion of culture, land, and identity rights, especially for women.

Keywords: Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*, *La teta asustada*, song, storytelling, Quechua, Quechuan women's rights, Peru, healing processes, liberation, trauma, rape, race, class, gender, Civil War, knowledge, traditional medicinal practices, traditional food sources, land rights, potato, Fausta, vagina, hope, indigenous, cultural, land, identity, rights

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From 1980 to 2000, a brutal and violent civil war plagued the country of Peru, claiming the lives of some 70,000 people. Seventy-five percent of the victims of this conflict were from the indigenous groups of highland Peru. Rape was one of the atrocities utilized by both the military and the guerrilla group, el Sendero Luminoso, to torture and instill fear in innocent victims. Consequently, the indigenous women were extremely victimized by the war and the effects of this tragedy can still be felt today in many Quechuan communities (Leiby). Since colonization, the indigenous population in Peru has been marginalized. In a country that has continually favored the white European heritage over indigenous blood and where race and class are intricately woven together into a hierarchy of power, the Quechua speakers have been silenced. Nevertheless, out of the ashes of the tragic civil war and the long history of oppression, Peruvian film maker Claudia Llosa has created an artistic gem that gives voice to the silenced.

The 2009 film, *The Milk of Sorrow* (La teta asustada), captures the lingering fear of civil war with the art of storytelling through song. With a captivating voice, the protagonist, Fausta, sings in her native Quechua, to tell her story. Although the majority of the film is in Spanish, Claudia Llosa beautifully incorporates the native language of her character into the film thus acknowledging the vast number of Peruvians whose principal language is Quechua but also speak Spanish. The plot is the following: Fausta and her mother are forced to leave their native village to live in the capital, Lima, as a result of the armed conflict and the death of her father. Tragically, Fausta's mother was raped, while pregnant by the same men who murdered her father. Therein, the film juxtaposes and highlights the traditional cultural beliefs of the displaced Quechuan community with the realities of life in modern day Lima, illustrating how the themes of gender, race and class affect this young indigenous woman.

Of significant importance is the fact that Fausta believes she has a disease, la teta asustada (the milk of sorrow), where the fear of rape is passed through a mother's breast milk. Clearly, this disease is not diagnosed by a medical doctor in Lima but rather comes from the ancient medicinal beliefs of the Quechuan community, providing a platform for viewers to understand the discrepancies between the modernized world and longstanding indigenous traditions that have existed for centuries. These cultural differences have contributed to the long history of mutual misunderstandings and racism. In the case of Fausta, her belief that she is sick with this ailment causes her to live life in fear and mistrust strangers, especially men. Furthermore, she attempts to protect herself from the horrors her mother endured by keeping a potato in her vagina to repel potential rapists because as she says, "only revulsion stops revolting people" (*Milk of Sorrow*).

This essay examines and explores Fausta's singing as a means to negotiate her rights as an indigenous woman in a modern world, confronting the multitude of boundaries constructed by her lived past, cultural practices and war. The idea that indigenous songs are the historical narrative of a cultural group is not a new idea. However, looking at song as a cultural script in which indigenous populations emigrate or assimilate into a new metropolitan culture in a modern globalized world, leads us to analyze the function of this oral narrative through a different lens. This essay treats Fausta's songs as narrative discourse and as Daiute and Lightfoot explain, "The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events" (x-xi). Fausta sings in both Quechua and Spanish to remember, to forget, to negotiate and find meaning in her future.

The film begins with Fausta's dying mother singing to her in Quechua about how they had "raped with no pity for my daughter inside" (*Milk of Sorrow*). Consequently, Fausta's belief that she has "la teta asustada" controls her life. This fear engulfs every aspect of her life, and the potato is her only sense of security. Nevertheless, the death of her mother becomes the incentive for Fausta to gain economic freedom and take her mother's body

back to their village for burial. Being forced to confront her anxiety and leave the protective borders of her uncle's house to work in the metropolitan space of Lima becomes a catalyst for Fausta to overcome fear thus providing her agency to make decisions for the first time as a grown woman. This symbolic journey from girlhood to womanhood is metaphorically represented with Fausta climbing a very long and tall set of stairs from the isolated area of her uncle's make shift neighborhood, to the robust hustle of the city above.

Fausta begins to work for a white, upper class woman, Aida, who is a famous pianist in Lima. While she works, Fausta sings. Aida is frustrated by her inability to compose new material and becomes fascinated with Fausta's songs. When Aida's pearl necklace ruptures, she offers to give Fausta one pearl at a time in exchange for singing her songs. This deal creates a relationship reminiscent of the colonial period in Latin America; the young indigenous woman becomes metaphorically enslaved to the white upper class woman of European descent. This act signals the distressing reality of the colonial structures of power that continue to plague Latin America. This conjunction between race and power persists and can be witnessed by simply turning on the television in Latin America. The maids are the dark skinned women of indigenous heritage, and the wealthy upper class is white. After independence from Spain, Latin American nations attempted to break ties with their colonial past. However, the social, political and economic institutions and structures that had been in place for hundreds of years were difficult to modify. Fausta and Aida's relationship is emblematic of the failure to dismantle the colonial structure of power as related to race.

Throughout the time Fausta is employed by Aida, she continues to use the potato in her vagina as a form of protection from rape. The use of the potato in the film is an evident cultural inclusion, as the potato is native to South America. Although this act is shocking to viewers, we can contextualize the use of the potato as a means for Fausta to express her rights as a woman by choosing to defend her body. Even if this desire to defend is fear-driven, the fact that she consciously decides to take action is crucial to her self-empowerment and transformation. Moreover, the potato's history in Peru is significant to the metaphor represented by the potato. There is scientific evidence that potatoes were domesticated as early as 10,000 years ago in Peru. Moreover, the Spanish word for potato—"papa"—is a Quechua word (The 3800 Types of Potatoes). Therefore, inserting the potato into her body metaphorically represents the idea of a return to her origin. That is to say, the potato symbolically represents the history of her people. The potato is native to the land and existed long before the arrival of the Spanish, just as Fausta's ancestors also existed long before the Spanish invasion. This native indigenous population was invaded and plundered by the Spanish and then centuries later invaded and violated again by the perpetrators of the violence during the Civil War. Therefore, Fausta attempts to protect herself from further invasion by utilizing a native food, one that has nourished her people for thousands of years and can now "nourish" her right to defend and protect her body.

Nevertheless, the potato will not nourish her body but will grow and rot inside her vagina. Ultimately, Fausta is the only one who can eradicate the powerfully symbolic putrefaction of the potato. Self-empowerment is attained through the discovery of her “voice”. Hence, Fausta’s singing becomes a tool for liberation and therein paves a path towards agency.

When Aida takes Fausta to her concert and performs one of Fausta’s original pieces, the film’s viewer anticipates the woman will acknowledge the work as Fausta’s song. Nevertheless, this does not occur. In a culminating moment on the drive home from the concert, Aida discusses the success of the concert with her driver. From the back seat, Fausta proclaims, “They [the people of Lima] liked it a lot.” Fausta’s boldness to speak without being asked a question angers Aida, and she orders Fausta out of the car. In the dark night, in the middle of an unknown street, we hear Fausta verbalizing to the car as it leaves her, “My pearls, my pearls. We made a deal.” This moment of verbal recognition is crucial to Fausta’s self-empowerment. We can see the fear that has held her captive begins to dissipate as she challenges Aida for the first time. Her song has ignited her courage to speak. The “slave” has confronted the master and is metaphorically challenging the unjust hierarchal Colonial structure of power, where class and social status are based on race.

In *Milk of Sorrow*, Claudia Llosa brilliantly develops the characters of Fausta and Aida: the Quechuan speaking indigenous woman and the white upper class woman of European decent. Llosa deliberately establishes this relationship of employer/worker which functions like owner/slave without any loyalty in the end. This juxtaposition therein becomes a clearly feminized version of the conquest and the colonial period. This female representation of the colonial structures of power negates the issue of gender in the patriarchal hierarchy of power that was present since the arrival of the Spanish. Therefore, by depicting the hierarchal structure with the two female characters, the film is able to specifically highlight the notion of race discrimination in Peru. Claudia Llosa creates a character and story that underscore the painful and violent history of Peru while opening a space for healing. From conquest to the Civil War and continuing to the present day, the indigenous populations have been enslaved, marginalized and abused by those in power. As Llosa has commented, “I share the idea that the task of opening spaces, to think, is the only way of facilitating the dialogue on a topic that brings so much pain, and this film was conceived as a search of healing” (Harris 1).

Therefore, this climactic moment that gives Fausta a voice and diminishes her fears leads her to sneak back to Aida’s house to take the pearls that she was promised. Meanwhile, the potato inside her has sprouted and is growing, making her ill. After collecting her pearls, Fausta faints and upon waking declares, “Get it removed from inside of me” (*Milk of Sorrow*). Finally, the sprouting rotten potato is surgically removed from her body. Then in the last scene of the film, we see a potted flowering plant on her doorstep. As the camera slowly scans the plant, it becomes apparent that the white flowering plant is a potato plant

(*Milk of Sorrow*). This ancient staple that dates back to before the conquest now flowers as a sign of hope instead of decaying and decomposing inside of Fausta. Befittingly, the potato symbolizes the indigenous struggle and the oppression and violence that have plagued the Quechua speakers of Peru. By metaphorically comparing a native staple, which originates in South America, to its native inhabitants, viewers discern the message of hope that Llosa depicts with the film. Most importantly, these final acts by Fausta, standing up to Aida and having the potato removed, are all inspired by her music. In this powerful and unforgettable film, Claudia Llosa captures the importance of song as a means of storytelling. As she states, “I was completely captured by the idea of how Andean peoples communicate about themselves through their myths, singing and dances. This belief about how war can be transmitted as an illness, generations through generations, is a mechanism to talk about what happened and to start a process of symbolic healing” (Harris 1). Hence, Fausta’s singing allows her to remember, but simultaneously she begins to heal and forget the destructive fear that engulfed her as a result of the Civil War. In the end, the white flower of the potato plant offers a sign of peace and hope, therein revealing the potential for healing and transformation. Clearly, Claudia Llosa believes that the dominant culture of Peru can change and liberate the victimized, the marginalized and the voiceless.

To conclude, this film depicts Fausta’s journey as emblematic of indigenous rights and discrimination in Peru. Fausta’s lyrical song tells her story and therein becomes a tool to break down the metaphoric borders of gender, class and race that have held ancient indigenous cultures captive. *Milk of Sorrow* gives voice to the powerless, the marginalized and the victims of a country that since the conquest of the Incas by the Spanish, have been silenced. From conquest to Civil War to the present day, the indigenous populations of Peru have been victimized by senseless racial discrimination. Nevertheless, Claudia Llosa creates a space to heal and gives hope for new beginnings. In the end, Fausta’s song liberates and allows her voice to be heard, just as the white breast milk of sorrow gives way to the white flower of hope. And as viewers of this vital and compelling film, we are left to contemplate the continual plight of indigenous populations throughout Latin America. Will their songs and stories be heard or will they be forgotten and silenced in our modern globalized world?

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