

An Intertextual Approach to the Political Poetry of Griselda Alvarez

Mayra Margarito Gaspar¹ and Silvia Magdalena Quezada Camberos²

¹Full Professor and Researcher, Department of Language and Literature, University of Guadalajara, MEXICO.

²Full Professor and Researcher, Department of Language and Literature, University of Guadalajara, MEXICO.

¹Corresponding Author: mayra.margarito@academicos.udg.mx



www.ijrah.com || Vol. 3 No. 5 (2023): September Issue

Date of Submission: 10-10-2023

Date of Acceptance: 17-10-2023

Date of Publication: 23-10-2023

ABSTRACT

The political poetry of Griselda Álvarez has played a fundamental role in the history of Mexico by highlighting silenced voices and social struggles through her verses. As the first female governor in Mexico, Álvarez paved the way for women in politics, and her poetry reflects her commitment to social justice and women's rights. Her poems, including *Canto a las barbas*, address pressing issues such as gender inequality, political oppression, and the fight for freedom, offering a critical and poetic perspective on the political reality of her time. Griselda Álvarez's work reveals the complex nature of art, which allows for connections between the ineffable essence of being and historical social issues. In this study, we use an intertextual analysis to approach her literary creation from a critical perspective, through which we observe that poetry constructs feelings, sensations, and beauty, while also serving as a tool for resistance and denunciation.

Keywords- Intertextuality, Mexican Literature, Poetry, Politics, Griselda Álvarez.

I. INTRODUCTION

Griselda Álvarez has become part of Mexico's history and an inspiration for women in politics worldwide. In 1979, she became the first woman to hold the position of governor in a Mexican state when she assumed the governorship of Colima [1]. This achievement marked a turning point in Mexican politics by challenging deeply rooted gender norms and demonstrating that women were equally capable of leading and making decisions in positions of high power. Her election opened doors for more women to become involved in politics and made a significant contribution to the fight for gender equality in Mexico.

An intertextual analysis provides a deeper understanding and appreciation of literature, as it focuses on unravelling the multiple layers of meaning present in a literary work. Thus, intertextuality can shed light on the socio-political elements inherent in literature by providing an interpretive framework that allows for the analysis and comprehension of how literary texts reflect, criticize, or engage with political and social issues within their historical and cultural context.

Intertextual references allow critics and readers to delve into the nuances, symbolism, and cultural context of a text, thereby revealing the richness of perspectives it can offer. By applying analysis to a work, doors are opened to a different understanding of the characters, plots, and motivations behind the actions, enriching the reading experience and opening new dimensions of interpretation. These intertextual connections also facilitate a broader exploration of the author's influences, the historical and literary references embedded in the text, and the ways in which the work engages with a broader literary or cultural tradition.

This approach to Álvarez's work focused on her political poetry, as we wanted to explore how her writing addresses social issues and how she uses poetry as a tool for reflection and critique in relation to the events of her time. For this, we revisited one of her poems with a strong political emphasis, "Canto a las barbas," as well as her work in general, to understand her perspective on political issues. In this way, her artistic work becomes a means through which the author expresses her opinions, complaints, and analysis of the social reality.

II. METHODOLOGY

Intertextual analysis in literature is a critical approach that focuses on the connections and links between texts to enhance the understanding of a particular literary work. Barthes [2] asserts that in literature, multiple voices and discourses converge; so, the author is not the sole owner of meaning. Thus, readers play an active role in interpreting a text and relating it to other texts they have read, highlighting the importance of intertextuality in literary comprehension.

Kristeva [3] highlights how intertextuality is crucial for the construction of cultural and literary identity. She argues that intertextuality allows texts to engage in dialogue and relate to each other over time, creating a network of meaning that enriches the reading experience and broadens the understanding of a work. Thus, intertextuality not only enriches literature but is also a phenomenon that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, connecting works and authors throughout literary history.

Intertextual analysis, as indicated by Barthes [2] and Kristeva [3], is essential for understanding how literary texts intertwine, mutually enrich each other, and enable readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning in literature. These intertextual elements can take different forms, such as direct quotations, allusions, parodies, or imitations, and they overlap within the main text, creating a palimpsest of layers of meaning.

Genette [4] also emphasizes the importance of intertextuality in the construction of meanings and the identity of a literary work. He argues that literary texts cannot be entirely autonomous, as they are always influenced by other texts and authors. This perspective challenges the notion of originality and demonstrates how literature is built upon a foundation of references and connections with other cultural discourses, enriching and deepening the reading experience.

Intertextuality plays a crucial role in literary analysis by enriching and expanding the meaning of a work, allowing critics and readers to connect it with other literary, cultural, and historical discourses. This practice reveals the influences, references, and dialogues that an author establishes with the literary tradition and other texts, adding an additional layer of depth and richness to the analysis. By recognizing intertextual connections, critics can unravel the author's motivations, sources of inspiration, and hidden interpretations that may not be apparent at first glance. Furthermore, intertextuality allows us to understand how a literary work fits into a broader context, whether it be cultural, historical, or political, enhancing our understanding and helping us appreciate its relevance on a broader scale.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

Canto a las barbas by Griselda Álvarez is a 20 pages work that shows the poetic mastery and the political

commitment of a female author that lives in a country immersed in a patriarchal system. This poem was published in July 1994 in Mexico City with a print run of 20,000 copies. It is intriguing in how it plays with the image of beards, using them as an allusion to a specific Mexican politician, but also as a symbol of wisdom and experience. In this way, it combines social criticism with metaphor to establish figures and contrasts.

Genette [4] argues that intertextuality and the notion of the palimpsest are valuable tools for literary analysis, allowing critics and readers to reveal the multiple layers of meaning that make up a work and understand how literature relates to its cultural and literary context. An analysis of *Canto a las barbas* from the perspective of intertextuality can establish a complex approach that allows us to weave connections with its socio-historical context and literary tradition, as well as to observe the function of the sonnet as a political combat discourse.

3.1. The socio-political context of 'Canto a las barbas'

The presidential elections of 1994 in Mexico were a crucial political event in the country's history, marked by the tragedy of Luis Donaldo Colosio's assassination. Colosio, the candidacy from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), promised significant changes in Mexico; for this reason, his murder triggered a political crisis and significant uncertainty about the electoral process [5]. This event raised questions about the stability of the Mexican political system and served as a preamble to the changes that would later be experienced in the country.

The federal elections took place on Sunday, August 21, 1994, despite the controversy and uncertainty surrounding them. Ernesto Zedillo, who succeeded Colosio as the PRI's candidate, ultimately won the presidency [6]. These elections also included the participation of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, from the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and Diego Fernández de Ceballos, also known as "El Jefe Diego," from the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The PRD represented a liberal option to the long-standing domination of the PRI; the PAN was characterized by his conservative rhetoric and his positions against the party in power [7]. These opposition parties represented a diverse range of voices, ideologies, and interests within a society and politics.

Despite not winning the 1994 elections, Fernández de Ceballos' candidacy had a lasting impact on Mexican politics by helping to solidify the PAN as a competitive political force in the country. The 1994 election marked the last uninterrupted victory for the PRI. This party held the presidency for over 70 years, including Zedillo's government. In 2000, Fox would become the first winner from an opposition party and a significant milestone in Mexico's history. After this, it would be several presidential terms before one of their candidates could once again assume the power.

This was the political climate of *Canto a las barbas*. Contextualizing a literary work is an essential aspect of literary analysis and appreciation. It provides readers with the necessary background information and framework to fully understand and appreciate the text. Without proper context, a literary work can lose much of its depth and significance.

By knowing the historical context, readers can appreciate how the author's ideas were influenced by the events and circumstances of their era. Contextualization aids in deciphering symbolism, themes, and motifs within the text. Literary works frequently employ symbolism that draws from the culture and era in which they were created. A simple object or phrase may carry profound meaning, and understanding its cultural significance enhances the reader's comprehension. Understanding the sociopolitical situation helps bridge the gap between the author's world and ours, enabling us to appreciate the nuances, themes, and cultural insights that make literature a timeless and profound art form.

3.2. An intertextual reading of 'Canto a las barbas'

Poetic analysis through intertextuality is a critical approach that aims to uncover the literary connections and references within a poem, demonstrating how the poetic text engages with other literary works, authors, and traditions. By examining the influences and implicit or explicit quotations in a poem, critics can discover additional layers of meaning and depth in the work. This perspective allows us to understand how poets draw inspiration from the literary tradition, reinterpret previous texts, and create a rich network of intertextual connections that enhance the reading experience and offer new insights into universal themes such as love, nature, identity, or even politics.

In political poetry, we find a reflection of the aspirations and challenges that society faces in its quest for justice and equity. Through intertexts and rhetorical devices, *Canto a las barbas* presents to us the convergence of campaign themes, social concerns of the time, and criticism of an ideological and political stance using a character known for his presidential candidacy. Thus, poetic elements are distinguished to critique and satirize Diego Fernández de Ceballos, highlighting his mistakes in rallies and conveying confrontational viewpoints.

The title of the work announces that Griselda Álvarez will approach the figure of the Mexican politician from the perspective of a poetic tradition that will allow her to establish an intriguing satirical critique. In this way, Álvarez takes up the most recognized elements of this politician, from his physical appearance to his rhetorical discourse, to present us with poetry laden with irony and reflection. In the first quatrain of the poem "La cara es el espejo del alma" (The Face Is the Mirror of the Soul), she reexamines the figure of Fernández de Ceballos through the symbolism of the beard.

Si con barbas la cara se engalana
algo esconde de origen tenebroso,

histrión de oficio, golpeador verboso,
muy lejos de una fórmula cristiana [8]

(If with a beard the face adorns itself,
it conceals something of a dark origin,
a histrion by trade, a verbose assailant,
far from a Christian formula)

The sonnet refers to the phrase 'the eyes are the windows to the soul,' although it deconstructs it to encompass the symbolic figure of the beard. In Matthew 6:22, Jesus said, 'The lamp of the body is the eye; so then, if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.' In the title of the poem, it is not precisely the eye but the face that is offered as the mirror of the soul, for the face reveals gesture and speech. If the face is the revealer of thoughts, the beard conceals them.

The third verse reiterates the sense of concealment because the character is a histrion, that is, a theater actor; someone who disguises themselves, who presents themselves as someone they are not. Because of this, his speech, his words, strike in a non-Christian manner at those who listen, with words that hurt. The portrait, as a rhetorical resource, combines external and internal traits; thus, the poet plays with the beards as a dichotomy: on the one hand, they are an ornament to show off; on the other hand, they are a tool to hide reality.

Canto a las barbas dates to May 12, 1994, prior to the electoral contest. The poet uses her text to express her poetic stance; therefore, it functions as a warning to characterize the actor who could threaten peace. Thus, she concludes the sonnet by saying: "Y vamos a las urnas. Que haya calma" [8] (And we go to the voting booths. Let there be calm). Satirical sonnets come from a longstanding poetic tradition. The poems of Juvenal, Luis de Góngora, Francisco de Quevedo, Juan Luis de Alarcón, Juana Inés de la Cruz, exhibit exemplary sharpness. Satirical poetry is sometimes aimed at specific individuals. These poems can have a powerful impact on society since it often targets public figures or politicians.

Satirical poets have employed this form of expression to comment on corruption, vanity, and the incompetence of political leaders and prominent figures, demonstrating how satirical poetry can be a literary tool for social and political critique. The negative judgment towards the presidential candidate's stance becomes evident with the second sonnet, simply titled "Viejerío." The term "viejerío" is a derogatory term used to refer to women, and it can be translated as "womenfolk" or "women" in a derogatory or disrespectful manner. The Mexican politician used this term in a public speech to belittle or demean women, which would explain the negative judgment and criticism in the sonnet.

By using the word "viejerío," the then-candidate reflects a profound and harmful gender discrimination. This label not only erases the diversity of women's experiences and contributions but also suggests a

devaluation of their worth, which reflects the entrenched misogyny in our society. Griselda Álvarez's sonnet expresses the female voice in the two tercets, to request unity through sisterhood:

Oídlo, barbispesos o barbones:
el respeto exigimos sin desvío,
somos ya más en número y razones
y el voto marcará nuestro albedrío.
Nos agraviaron y sin reflexiones.
¡Nos vemos en las urnas, viejerío! [8]

(Listen, men with beards or stubble:
we demand respect unequivocally,
we are now more in number and reasons
and the vote will mark our will.
They wronged us without reflection.
See you at the voting booths, womenfolk)

In many of his works, Quevedo responded to the criticisms and attacks of his contemporaries with wit and sharpness. By satirizing his adversaries, Quevedo often self-deprecated, creating a kind of humorous self-critique that contrasted with the exaggerated virtues of his opponents [9]. This strategy allowed him to defend his own literary prestige while ridiculing his rivals. Similarly, Álvarez takes up the term "viejerío" to call for a unity that aims to regain respect and value for women.

Political portraiture as a poetic expression is a powerful literary tool that enables artists to capture the essence and nuances of political figures and their circumstances in verses. Through the choice of words, metaphors, and symbolism, poets can encapsulate the complexity of politics and the personalities of leaders. The political portrait presented by Álvarez conveys a devastating judgment and opinion of the character:

Usted es un peligro, sus conceptos
retrógrados y falsos, de comedia,
en débiles cerebros son preceptos [8]

(You are a danger, your retrograde
and false concepts, of comedy,
are precepts in feeble minds)

Political satire is a form of artistic expression often used to criticize political figures and challenge their actions and stances. In this case, Álvarez uses her poetry to question and criticize the politician in question, offering a negative view of his character and discourse. This literary approach allows poets not only to comment on the politics of their time but also to express their own opinions and judgments in a creative and provocative manner.

The description and reflection combined seek mockery (ridicule) and introspection (thought). It appears that a sentence is established that shapes the ideology. If in the first three sonnets, the mentioned character has been labeled as a professional hysteron, thick-bearded, and medieval, the next three do not improve the treatment. The

rhetorical questions provide the sonnet with an emotional tone that manages to engage the reader:

¿Atacar a las viejas? ¿En campaña?
¿Mandar hasta su casa al viejerío?
¡Qué irreflexión tan grave, señor mío!
O que escasa neurona le acompaña[8]

(Attacking all women? During a campaign?
Sending the womenfolk home?
What a serious lack of reflection, sir!
Oh, what a dearth of neurons accompanies you)

Canto a las barbas represents a fundamental historical moment that transcends the electoral contest and focuses on the gender issue, addressing a timeless problem. It's not so much about the caricatured character but what it represents. All the sonnets in the work attack a retrograde character, out of touch, living in a country and at a time when women have gained the right to education, to vote, to free thought. In "Estilo de campaña" (Campaign Style), the final two lines are emphatic: "misoginia en sus frases aparece / y afirma así su condición de larva" (misogyny appears in his phrases / and thus affirms his larval condition) [8].

Griselda Álvarez represents the intellectual female politician who can speak about the social disadvantages that women faced in the late 20th century. Her quest for equality led her to a lifelong struggle in both the public and private life, without resorting to commonplace euphemisms. By the time of the publication of "Canto a las Barbas," Griselda Álvarez's intellectual, ideological, political, and practical maturity was characterized by the indissoluble convergence of her subjectivity. Likewise, in the social context of Mexico, there were also changes in perspective regarding the conception and role of women.

Cano [10] points out that, at the end of the 20th century, feminism in Mexico was not a clearly defined and visible social movement. However, its egalitarian ideas, defense of women's autonomy, condemnation of sexual violence, and critique of androcentrism in knowledge represented a point of view with varying degrees of influence in public policy management, social organizations, the media, academic institutions, and everyday life.

In Álvarez's poetry, the political realm (its various actors, both singular and collective) is an individual matter. However, is it possible, on a subjective level, to influence those who formalize politics, such as public administration, social organizations, the media, academia, and culture? In Griselda Álvarez's texts, it is possible to observe that the shared responsibility between the subject and its power to influence the collective constitutes an intellectual congruence.

Political poems often serve as a potent medium through which feminist perspectives and concerns can be articulated and explored. These poems provide a platform for poets to dissect and critique the dynamics of power,

gender roles, and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Álvarez give voice to the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of women, shedding light on the challenges they face in a patriarchal world. By employing powerful imagery, metaphor, and emotion, her political poems can evoke empathy, provoke thought, and inspire action, fostering a deeper understanding of feminist ideals and the urgency of dismantling systemic sexism. These poems not only challenge the status quo but also contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding gender equality and women's rights, making them a crucial element in the broader feminist discourse.

IV. OUR APPROACH

Intertextual analysis plays an essential role in the understanding and appreciation of poetry. In literature, references, influences, and connections to other cultural texts, works of art, myths, and traditions can be subtle but profoundly significant. This type of analysis allows for the discovery of additional layers of meaning and enriches the appreciation of a poem.

Poetry is often characterized by its complexity and richness of imagery and symbols. Intertextual analysis can reveal how a poem engages in dialogue with the works of other poets, expanding its meaning and context. Furthermore, intertextuality can help identify universal themes and archetypes that cut across literature throughout history and cultures. This provides a more comprehensive perspective of the poem and highlights its ability to connect and communicate profound aspects of the human experience across time and space.

Intertextual analysis is essential to fully appreciate the richness, depth, and continuity of political poetry, allowing the verses to resonate in dialogue with literary tradition and humanity. Political poetry plays a crucial role in the expression and political awareness of a society, enabling poets to address social and political issues in an artistic and provocative manner. As Eagleton [10] points out, political poetry can be a powerful means of questioning established norms, challenging authority, and giving voice to marginalized voices.

Political poets often use language and metaphor creatively to expose injustice, oppression, and inequalities, which can raise awareness and promote social mobilization. Jameson [11] highlights the importance of political poetry as a form of cultural and social criticism in an increasingly globalized world. He argues that political poetry can serve to understand and resist the forces of capitalism and cultural homogenization. Political poetry plays a vital role in social critique and resistance, allowing poets to express political and social concerns in a creative and provocative manner.

In Álvarez's written work, the intertwining of her ideological stance with her poetic artistry is common; her artistic proposal materializes in her public persona as two sides of the same coin. By exploring the tensions and

contradictions of contemporary society, political poetry can contribute to critical reflection and activism, reminding us that literature is not merely an entertainment but a powerful tool for questioning and transforming the world.

In her creative and essayistic texts, references to the power of words are constant. Therefore, while respecting their differences in form and communicative objectives, her progressive and feminist position is evident in both her lyrical and her non-fictional writings. For example, in the introduction of "Algunas mujeres en la historia de México" (Some Women in the History of Mexico), she listed the most popular social demands of women during the 1970s and 1980s:

Igualdad jurídica, igualdad en los factores de desarrollo, participación en una filosofía común, marco de libertad en la expresión, expresión orientada, útil, positiva, objetivos importantes, claros, productivos, todo esto desembocando en un ideal universal, común a la especie, que se empieza a sostener para algún día saldar el endeudamiento contraído por la mitad del género humano [12].

Legal equality, equality in development factors, participation in a common philosophy, a framework of freedom in expression, useful a directed expression, important, clear and productive objectives, all of this leading to a universal ideal, common to all people, which begins to be upheld to someday settle the debt incurred by half of humanity.

This sort of set of demands place "legal equality" or "equality in development factors" on the same level as "freedom of expression" and "directed expression." In this way, Alvarez equates the issues that appeal to the urgency of political and sociocultural changes with aspects related to thought, subjectivity, and ethics. However, further on in the same introduction, she separates these two aspects, previously parallel, by emphasizing the value of "el estímulo que debe dársele a su capacidad productiva y creadora" (the stimulus that must be given to their productive and creative capacity) [12]. Thus, on one hand, there is a reference to women within the economic and social system; while, on the other hand, it exposes women as imaginative subjects, that is, women who are proactive, inventive, ingenious, and artistic. In her case, productivity could be linked to her political activity and creativity to her literary work.

It is not, therefore, either derogatory or overinterpretative to conclude that Griselda Álvarez's poetry must be examined considering the binary dichotomy of the product and the creation, since her literature underlines the complementarity of both aspects of the "self". Alvarez does not separate the poetic voice from the authorial voice. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that to deeply understand her artistic proposal, it is

necessary to comprehend the relevance and influence of her feminist proclamations and her professional achievements.

If we take the author's formative years as a reference point until the time she assumed the governorship of Colima, the necessary context would be the Mexican suffrage movement, which corresponds to what is commonly referred to as the first wave of feminism. Álvarez was a young woman from a family involved in public administration, and her personal aspirations revealed a vocation to continue her family's activities. For this reason, women's participation in political life was of great interest to her and a goal that changed the history of Mexico.

V. CONCLUSION

Griselda Álvarez's work demonstrates that art surpasses the limits of its aesthetic value. Literature is a cultural product situated in a specific time and space, so it responds to the sociocultural concerns of its context. In this sense, its poetic function allows for the enjoyment of the reading experience, but its communicative function extends to other areas such as political or the ideological matters.

The figure of Griselda Álvarez, as a poet, bestowed upon Mexican literature a poetry filled with reflections on existence, death, and the essence of womanhood. Moreover, as a politician, she built a brilliant career that led her to hold significant positions at both the regional and national levels, roles that had previously been predominantly occupied by men.

The political poetry of Griselda Álvarez transcends the boundaries of its time and place, as her words continue to resonate in contemporary society. Her verses inspire present generations to engage in politics and question injustices, reminding us that poetry can be a powerful tool for social change. Thanks to her bravery and

commitment, Griselda Álvarez left a lasting literary and political legacy that remains relevant in the ongoing struggle for a more just and equitable world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Galeana, P. (2018). *La primera gobernadora. Mujeres protagonistas de nuestra historia*. México: Secretaría de Cultura/INEHRM.
- [2] Barthes, B. (1986). *The death of the author*. In: *The rustle of language* (pp. 49-55). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [3] Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [4] Genette, G. (1997). *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- [5] Meyer, L. (2005). *El Estado en busca del ciudadano. Un ensayo sobre el proceso político mexicano contemporáneo*. México: Océano.
- [6] Martínez, A. (1995). Las elecciones federales mexicanas de agosto de 1994. *Revista de Estudios Políticos (Nueva Época)*, 88: 311-339.
- [7] Peschard, J. (1995). La explosión participativa: México, 1994. *Estudios Sociológicos*, 13 (38): 341-370.
- [8] Álvarez, G. (1994). *Canto a las barbas*. México: Winko Impresores.
- [9] Rey, A. (2010). La construcción crítica de un Quevedo reaccionario, *Bulletin Hispanique*, 112 (2): 633-669.
- [10] Cano, G. (1996). Más de un siglo de feminismo en México. *Debate feminista*, 14, 345-360.
- [11] Eagleton, T. (2006). *The Function of Criticism*, London: Verso.
- [12] Jameson, F. (2009). *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso.
- [13] Álvarez, G. (1975). *Algunas mujeres en la historia de México*. México: Complejo Editorial Mexicano.