

Constante González Groba. *On Their Own Premises: Southern Women*

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On Their Own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace is one of the latest contributions to North American Studies by the Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans, edited by the University of Valencia. This volume is a welcome addition to the work on women's literature already accomplished in Spain. In this same collection, *Voice in the South: Female Identity and Language in Lee Smith's Fiction* (Carmen Rueda Ramos) and *Planteamientos estéticos y políticos en la obra de Zora Neale Hurston* (Ana María Fraile Marcos), among others, offer a perfect complement to the themes discussed in this study. Outside this collection, works such as María Pilar Marín Madrazo's translation and edition of Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* and *Autobiografía: versiones femeninas en la literatura norteamericana del siglo XX*, by Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico, are also helpful acquisitions for in-depth study. These works, which show an ever-growing interest in feminist topics in literature, are true assets which represent the healthy state of literary studies on women in our country.

Constante González Groba is Chair in American Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela. In 1994 he published *El mundo novelesco de Carson McCullers: Soledad, amor e identidad*, also part of the Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans collection. Among his works we can find a critical edition of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1997) and numerous essays and book chapters on Melville, Lee Smith, Carson McCullers, Stephen Crane and others. This new book, focused on the home as depicted by southern female writers, is a further example of his valuable contribution to American Studies.

The word "home" has been attributed many different meanings throughout history and, as González Groba wisely points out, each one of those meanings

can be perceived as the product of the influence exerted by a number of general characteristics such as time, place, class, race and gender, on the one hand, and by a wide range of more specific traits related to each individual's personal experience (i.e. childhood memories, personal choices,... etc), on the other hand. Therefore, it seems to me that trying to define such a complex concept can become an extremely daring task. Not surprisingly, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines a home as "a building or structure in which a person lives", disregarding any connotations the word might suggest. However, as González Groba states, "the word 'home' carries a great deal of emotional meaning" (22). In his captivating introduction, he establishes that a home is more than just "a building or structure", since the description of the domestic sphere "often reflects the political" (15). "The home is the stage on which the players are revealed and examined in both the most social and most private moments of their lives, these sometimes occurring simultaneously" (16), he says. According to the author, and in agreement with contemporary feminist voices such as Ann Romines and Lee Smith, this justifies the necessity of works like his, where the domestic is brought to the foreground of critical study. With this purpose in mind he goes back to the end of the 19th century, a time period when writing about domestic affairs was a common practice among women, who, due to their social confinement to the home, wrote about their most familiar surroundings. Then, he explores the way in which female narrative evolves into the 21st century, in accordance with the social and political changes which take place over a century of history, thus proving that the private and public spheres are indeed interconnected. In this way, González Groba offers a well-documented and exceptional study in which he successfully demonstrates the thesis around which his book revolves: that there is an ambivalent attitude towards the home in the literary corpus written by American southern women since the 1890s. Thus, in some accounts the notion of home appears as a prison ruled by patriarchy that denies women self-determination, whereas in others it is depicted as a place for self-affirmation where women practice their liberating domestic rituals in communion with other women.

The especial attention the author pays to the practice of patchwork quilting in the chapter on Alice Walker's work is especially noteworthy, since the quilt, perceived by González Groba, following Showalter, as "the central figure for female literary creativity" (214), can be considered the embodiment of this same ambivalence his analysis defends. Here he points out that quilting was one of the few outlets to creativity that women had in a time when any activity outside the realm of the domestic was considered improper for them. He further emphasizes the relevance of the quilt to understand women's culture, since it can be seen as a metaphor of the connection across time and space among the women who worked on it generation after generation, strengthening the mother-daughter bond that some critics such as Linda Wagner-Martin have argued is central to the construction of female identity (267). However, drawing on Elaine Showalter and Elaine

Hedges's theories, González Groba carefully reminds the reader of the danger of over-romanticizing the concept of the quilt, given its connection to women's domestic culture and the oppression it represents.

One of the many strengths I find in González Groba's analysis is the organized way in which it is structured. Whereas the straightforward introduction sets the context of the study and the necessity of the same, the first chapter successfully draws on different fields of study (sociological, literary and phenomenological) in order to discuss different theories dealing with the interaction that exists between the self and the domestic space, and with the concepts of gender and space. It is precisely this first chapter where most of the premises of the book are presented to the reader, to be further discussed and exemplified in the following nine chapters, which provide a thorough analysis of the works of nine southern women writers such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston and Lee Smith. Although it might seem at times that the introduction to each chapter is somewhat repetitive of the ideas established in both the introduction and chapter one, the exhaustive and careful way in which the author sets each work within its historical, social and ideological context, making informed use of the variety of critical sources available, turns the entire book into an enlightening and pleasurable reading experience. Partly, the success of this achievement is owed to a flawless editorial work, made evident in the system of footnotes and the careful treatment of the text.

Although the ideas argued by González Groba are not new in the field of feminist literary criticism, the originality of his work resides on the approach he takes. In this way, he presents the question of female search for identity from many different perspectives, each one represented by the different backgrounds to which each female writer belongs. For example, he explores the questions of home and identity from the point of view of a 19th century white writer (Kate Chopin), a 20th century black writer (Alice Walker) and a 20th century white lesbian writer (Lillian Smith), among others. And he manages to prove that, beyond the inevitable differences that their backgrounds create, women share a common experience which shapes their perception of the home in a similar way.

Finally, and followed by an excellent bibliographical section, a well-rounded conclusion closes this critical work. Here, the author takes us back to the ideas mentioned in the opening chapters and emphasizes the need to leave behind restrictive dichotomies in favor of a comprehensive view. Also, he stresses the importance of the home as a source of identity and, most importantly, the complex nature of this space, which grants women with identity and suppresses it at the same time. Clearly, such a complexity deserves the high level of scholarship present in this remarkable piece of literary criticism. Despite the difficulty of the task, I must say that González Groba has accomplished such an endeavor with great success. As in one of Alice Walker's quilts, he stitches together different perceptions of womanhood and domesticity which result in a valuable piece of artwork.

For its many strengths, I consider this book to be an outstanding contribution to the Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans as well as to the field of Literary Studies.

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