

FASHION, GENDER AND AGENCY
IN LATIN AMERICAN AND SPANISH
LITERATURE

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MONOGRAFÍAS

TAMESIS

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Introduction

Glorifying the Needle and Thread

[...] the gesture associated with the needle, seamstress, and sewing machine, it can be said to bring parts together with the purpose of constructing a new whole, a gesture that is aligned in opposition to fragmenting modernity [...].
(Matich 242)

[...] moreover, because of its imaginative evocation, literature conveys emotions and feelings about clothes that can highlight character and further the plot of a play or a novel; at times, [...], fashion itself can be said to produce fiction.

(Ribeiro 1)

Fashion is the “idea,” the non-real. With desires, dreams, and idealizations as its counterparts and companions, and as its main driving force – fashion is also *fictive*. Fashion, then, is a species of fiction.

(Wallenberg xv)

In the face of a sartorial nightmare involving a cloth mishap, a meticulous tailor opts to design new uniforms for a general out of lively fabric featuring colorful fish and parrots, and the result is unprecedented: bilateral peace between neighboring rivals. In Rocío Martínez’s Spanish children’s book, *El de-sastre perfecto* (2010) [*The Perfect Tailor/Disaster*], a savvy sartorial protagonist exemplifies the empowered depictions of textile arts – whether needlework, tailoring or fashion design – that abound in contemporary Latin American and Spanish cultural representations of professions involving these artforms. I argue that while the seamstress as a relatable protagonist fell out of fashion after the nineteenth century, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries representations of seamstresses re-emerge with a changed image. As a result, contemporary writers challenge the gendered limitations that were especially important in nation-building, and instead offer protagonists who break through the negative connotations involving sewing and morality. Although preoccupations regarding the delineations of private and public spheres often remain, recent sartorial figures deconstruct regional and national

borders in addition to blurring gender and sexual borders. By questioning physical, geographical boundaries, the protagonists reflect the interconnected state of garment and textile industries in the global economy.

This rise of interest in the needle and thread is quite surprising: more than ever before, global culture has distanced itself from the sources of clothing and the agents behind the creation of garments.¹ Once lauded expertise has been demoted to unskilled and exploited factory labor, resulting in decreased prices and quality and increased consumption and waste. Yet, literature and popular-culture media platforms such as television, films, blogs and other forms of social media tell a different story. The worldview involving sewing is ripping out the seams of delimited representation. Instead, protagonists enter exciting adventures by acting as spies, facilitating peace or reveling in privileged entry into the upper class's private sphere – all facilitated by their primary professions as seamstresses and needlewomen.² This book, through the analysis of artistic productions, intertwines the current state of mass garment production and labor exploitation with cultural works that glorify artistry and design. Particularly in Latin American and Iberian literature, where sartorial personifications have proliferated historically, taking up the needle is a privileged artifact of production.

Recent images involving women in textile arts contrast starkly with the nineteenth-century literary and popular-culture representations of the victimization and sexualization of young females employed in sartorial professions. In Latin America and Spain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the seamstress, whose profession was born out of economic necessity for women of lower-middle-class standing, often walked a fine tightrope of morality, one that could break at any moment and plunge her into the other predominant profession of women: prostitution.³ Writing about Chile, Elizabeth Quay Hutchison notes that gendered double standards prevailed; shame associated with women working outside the home reached its height with the rise of prostitution, stemming from reduced factory work and measly wages in sewing professions (cf. 132–5). The head of the Seamstress Union, Ester Valdés de Díaz, not only worried about how women were forced into prostitution but was also concerned about their poor working conditions and their need to walk through the seedy nocturnal streets of Santiago when

¹ See Sherry Schofield-Tomschin's "Home Sewing: Motivational Changes in the Twentieth Century" for an account of sewing trends in the North American context from the popularization of the sewing machine up until the second half of the twentieth century.

² See Barbara Burman's "Seamstresses" regarding the flexibility of terminology when referring to this centuries-old profession.

³ According to historian Donna Guy, in Buenos Aires, "domestic service and sewing at miserable wages were the major alternatives to prostitution" (42).

returning home from late shifts (cf. 139). Despite the importance of their work in dressing the nation, women's contributions as seamstresses, especially in group settings, were devalued, resulting in a hostile environment.⁴ Such preying on female factory workers carries into the twenty-first century with increased gender-based violence and violations, directly paralleling the depreciation of the clothing items fashioned and causing a disposable mindset toward textile products and, all too often, human lives.

Nineteenth-century Latin American and Spanish literature reflected these difficult socioeconomic realities for women needleworkers.⁵ Two turn-of-the-century Peruvian works exemplify this: Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's *Blanca Sol* (1889) and Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Herencia* (1895). Both juxtapose the scandalous figure of the prostitute with that of the pious, virtuous seamstress. In the literary representations, the seamstress was portrayed with pity not only because of her morally vulnerable state, but also for her participation in the public sphere since sewing was considered more respectable as a pastime, in the confines of the home, for the beautification of the private sphere. In her reading of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, Ana Peluffo examines the trespassing of physical and cultural boundaries required from nineteenth-century working women: "El concepto de 'la mujer pública' es en la época republicana altamente sospechoso (sea ésta costurera, prostituta, o literata) y es justamente esta cercanía semántica entre distintas formas de identidades femeninas 'peligrosas,' lo que genera en el sujeto literario el paradójico deseo de establecer fronteras y distancias" (49) ["The concept of the 'public woman' is highly suspicious in the Republican era (be it seamstress, prostitute or a woman of letters), and it is precisely this semantic closeness between different forms of 'dangerous' feminine identities that generates in the literary subject the paradoxical desire to establish borders and distances"].⁶ These once ossified

⁴ Clare Hunter's monograph, *Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of the Needle* (2019), recognizes the silenced power of needlewomen. For centuries this anonymity robbed women of their power. While the collective, creative endeavors of groups of women had adorned cathedrals and palaces, according to the author, "By the nineteenth century, needlework had been irretrievably demoted, and domestic embroidery was seen as a decorative frippery – just women's work" (13). Such demeaning postures have continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and furthered gender inequality.

⁵ See Olga Matich for a reading of nineteenth-century seamstresses in Russian literature, which also involves economic and sexual exploitation. Matich sites Chernyshevsky's "What Is To Be Done?" in its treatment of sewing in the context of female sewing cooperatives envisioned to provide agency in personal and private life (cf. 248–9).

⁶ All translations without a change in page number, denoting the translation used, are my own.

notions regarding the seamstress's "dangerous" feminine identity diversify in contemporary cultural productions.

The cultural changes also include shifts in clothing production and cycles. Inarguably, the invention of the sewing machine has accelerated the creation and turnover of fashion.⁷ Not only this, but it was a significant mechanical player in the Industrial Revolution, forging a new pathway in the quest for modernity and shifting seamstresses from the private to the public sphere. The sewing machine – reducing sewing time of a shirt from fifteen hours to one – exacerbated exploitation instead of alleviating it (Hunter 263). Sewing by hand had been an activity promoting community and conversational companionship, but that conversation was now drowned out by the loud clank of the sewing machine, silencing women's voices both literally and metaphorically.

The metaphoric underpinnings of the sewing machine encourage a reflection on the newfound transition from the "old world" to the modern one. Mexican short story "La máquina de coser" (1892) ["The sewing machine"] by Vicente Riva Palacio stresses the importance of this mechanical gamechanger, soon to be a coveted household necessity. In the short story the sewing machine takes precedence to human beings, especially the female characters: "La mujer es, sobre todo, definida por el objeto; la máquina de coser como validador moral, tanto en sentido positivo como negativo: su pérdida impulse al descenso socio-moral, la recuperación confirma ese descenso, la transmisión seguirá legitimando esa idea de lo femenino aceptado y no aceptado" (Sánchez Robles 120) ["Woman is, above all, defined by the object; the sewing machine as a moral validator, both in the positive and negative sense: the loss of the object drives the character to socio-moral descent, the recovery of it confirms that descent, (and) the transfer of it will continue to legitimize the idea of what is accepted and not accepted as feminine"]. In the narration, the sewing machine takes a moralizing journey: first pawned by a single mother and daughter who opt for a less "respectable" way to make a living, the machine is recovered later by a general who decides that a young girl with more reputable prospects would be the worthier owner. This coveted item indicates social standing and acts as a curious destabilizer of modernity in Mexico, especially in regards to feminine identity. Noble work, made possible through the possession of the sewing machine, has more to do with making a living versus having an inheritance or aristocratic position (cf. 120–1).⁸ Likewise, in the contemporary

⁷ See Joy Emery Spanabel's "Nineteenth-Century Technology" for a detailed reading of the importance of the sewing machine as a major player in industrialization.

⁸ Sánchez Robles notes that the female protagonist's name change as an outward identity marker accompanies a change of profession. In the contemporary novels included in this book, significant name changes facilitate the designers' successes as well as gender-bending or blending. In these representations, the fluidity of the profession promotes physical mobility, as well as self-exploration and actualization.