

REYITA AS A SYMBOL OF CUBA:

THE ROLE OF AFRO-CGEUBAN WOMEN IN
DAISY RUBIERA CASTILLO'S TESTIMONIAL NOVEL

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of Reyita as a symbol of Cuba in Daisy Rubiera Castillo's testimonial novel "Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century" (1997) as a literary figure. Although the protagonist undergoes several hardships as an Afro-Cuban woman of low socioeconomic status, her struggles represent far more than just herself. They are indicative of the living conditions in pre-Revolutionary Cuban society and mirror the daily struggles faced by several individuals, and provide insight into what it was like to be an individual "triply marginalized" by gender, race, and class. However, these three "setbacks" never stopped Reyita from always serving the greater good. She always put others before herself, as demonstrated from her relationship with her family. These actions were not just limited to her family, but could also be expanded to the entire population of Cuba. Such selfless efforts helped Reyita increase her independence, and by the end of the book, Reyita's dependence on her husband becomes almost nonexistent. The testimony was written by her daughter, a well-known historian and anthropologist, who brings the validity of the work into question, though it also makes us question how much of it is faithful to Reyita's experiences, and how much of it was influenced by her daughter, since Daisy Rubiera experienced discrimination for many of the same reasons as Reyita. The theories and perspectives of other Afro-Cuban writers, such as Maya Anderson, Roberto Zurbarano, and Ernesto Pérez Castillo, will also be analyzed and discussed to investigate the following question: In what way does Reyita, a female, Afro-Cuban descendant of slaves, represent the entire Cuban nation?

Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century by Daisy Rubiera Castillo (1997) is a testimonial novel that narrates the life of an Afro-Cuban woman of low socioeconomic status in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. The protagonist of the novel, María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902 – 1997), known as Reyita, is "triply marginalized" through race, gender, and social class. As a result, she suffers immensely, even though these aspects are not in her control, as she was born with them. Her own mother, Isabel, rejected her because she was the only child born with a darker skin color. Reyita, an underprivileged, Afro-Cuban woman was not the only one to suffer, however. In fact, her difficulties represent far more than just herself. These issues of racism, sexism,

and classism were prevalent all throughout Cuba, causing millions of individuals to endure hardship throughout their lives. Nonetheless, Reyita did not permit such superficial aspects to dictate the course of her life. She always acted with thought and authenticity, as demonstrated through her relationship with her family, which can be expanded to symbolize the entire island of Cuba, to a certain extent. This leads to the following question: In Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century by Daisy Rubiera Castillo, in what way does Reyita, a female, Afro-Cuban descendant of slaves, represent the entire Cuban nation?

Reyita's testimony takes place in Cuba primarily between the years 1868 and 1953, ending just before the start of the Revolution. Historical events during the twentieth century, including the rise to power of Fulgencio Batista, play a significant role in establishing the ideologies of the nation in which Reyita grew up. Slavery was officially abolished on October 7th, 1886 by the Spanish Parliament, yet as historian Aline Helg writes, "...despite this apparent normality, contradictions were becoming more pronounced. Slavery was abolished, but Cuban society continued to be deeply divided along racial lines" (24). The elimination of slavery did not immediately result in the elimination of discrimination and racism. Children's skin color needed to be declared first during registration. Furthermore, black Cuban children did not receive the same treatment in public schools as white Cuban children. Most private institutions would not even accept black Cuban students (Helg 25). Not only was there impartiality between different races, but there was a significant wage difference between men and women as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was difficult to employ men, let alone women, despite the fact that women had a higher chance of having a full-time job: 75.9% as opposed to 66.8% (Pérez-Stable 32). In addition, working women were often more educated than working men, but unfortunately, still did not receive the same pay as men (Pérez-Stable 33).

Racial barriers both from today and Reyita's time stem from generations of bigotry towards Afro-Cubans. They are instilled in the minds of Cubans and considered standard ideologies to live by. To move past this would require much more than the abolition of a law. Rubiera Castillo depicts the suppression faced by her mother due to these societal standards, but also demonstrates how she overcame such standards and created a new paradigm for Afro-Cuban women. She structures the testimony in a manner which initially describes all the adversities Reyita underwent, only to negate them with instances in which she proves her true strength. Rubiera Castillo provides several examples of how Reyita experienced prejudice, but does not leave it at that. Every example is immediately followed up with Reyita going against the social norm and acting on what she believes. This juxtaposition of contrary events serves to emphasize the nobleness of Reyita's character.

The text describes how during Reyita's childhood, shortly after slavery was abolished in 1886, the most immediate source of oppression came from her mother, who did not accept her as her own daughter because she was only one with dark skin. Reyita herself admits that "Deep down Isabel wasn't really bad. For a long time [she] never understood her, but when [she] got old, [she] realized that [her] poor mother was a victim of the misfortune we blacks all suffered, as much in previous centuries as in this one" (32). Rubiera Castillo recounts a story of when Reyita's sister dressed up Reyita to go to a neighborhood party, but their mother refused to let her attend because she would be the only "negrita." Family is typically the first place where we learn what morals to live by and values to incorporate into our lifestyle. In the beginning of the novel, Reyita had no choice but to obey her mother's rules, even though she did not agree with them and they hurt her profoundly. Though she genuinely wanted to, Reyita ended up not attending the neighborhood party only because she was following her mother's orders.

As the novel progresses however, Reyita begins to find her voice and gain the courage she needs to discover what she truly believes in and live by it. To oppose the beliefs of one's own family takes an immense amount of confidence and bravery. At another instance in the testimony, Reyita is living with her cousin, Carmen Duarte, and her daughter, Emelina. This was significantly before Batista came into power, when he was about the same age as Reyita, as implied by the text. Emelina was working with a tutor in order to prepare for an entrance exam for her bachelor's degree. Reyita would always pretend to be ironing clothes so that she could be in a position where she could eavesdrop on their lessons without being seen. Eventually, the tutor realized this and gave Reyita the exam, which she passed. He completed all the necessary formalities needed for her to attend the university. Unfortunately, Reyita did not have enough money to purchase the uniform, and could not attend as a result. She asked all her relatives if they could lend her enough money, but they refused, thinking she was not intelligent enough to attend a university and had gone

insane. The idea of someone like Reyita, with her dark complexion, attending college seemed so unrealistic to her family that they thought she was being extremely irrational. For Reyita, the answer "no" was not a barrier. In fact, it was one step closer to her goal. She describes her feelings during this situation, explaining "I didn't feel crushed, no. I had succeeded! It was wonderful knowing I could do it, even if it didn't work out. I was very sad, but I soon recovered: I was young, I could take another route" (58). At the young age of 18, Reyita demonstrates the maturity and wisdom of someone much older. Knowing that she had the ability to achieve her goals was sufficient for her, even if it would not actually come into fruition. Everyone she knew was against her desire to obtain an education, but the opinions of others did not hold her back. Instead, she used this as motivation to overcome their expectations of her. Reyita's ability to overcome any obstacle she is faced with, without ever losing her positive outlook, is what enables Reyita to be observed as a symbol of Cuba. She maintains this mentality throughout the entire novel. Reyita is a leader by example, demonstrating to others how any barrier they may be faced with is actually a stepping-stone bringing them closer to their goals.

Reyita's ability to disregard the opinions of others can be expanded to include everyone around her, besides just her family. When Reyita was working as a maid in the houses of others, she questioned why she was not called "doña," or "madam," when this is what all other married women were called. After observing other maids, specifically the ones who were called "doña," she realized this was because of her low socioeconomic status. She was troubled by this at first, but quickly overcame all feelings of negativity when she recognized the value of other forms of wealth. She began to take pride in the accomplishments of her children, and understood that "Now I have lots of riches, not material but spiritual ones: my children and my grandchildren, how wonderful! They are teachers, doctors, engineers, professors, technicians and workers... I feel rich, but even with such wealth I don't want anyone calling me Doña, I'd rather be Reyita, simply Reyita" (63).

This instance depicts a very significant side of her. Her self-naming depicts her ability to rise above any labels society might give her. In addition, money is a necessity to function in society. To possess the ability to look beyond material possessions and understand the worth of intangible objects, such as intelligence, was not a common trait of the prerevolutionary society Reyita grew up in. Although she was in a difficult financial situation and needed to clean others' houses despite her intelligence, she did not lament over what she did not have. Instead, she adapted to the situation and appreciated what she did have. To her, the success of her children was much more valuable than something as superficial as money. In the same way, she recognizes the color of her skin with the same understanding of its ultimate superficiality. However, the Cuban nation also needs to understand the superficiality of skin color in order to view it as a hindrance and

surmount it, but for everyone else to realize this, it has to start with one person. In this text, that person is Reyita. She demonstrates how to live with respect for others and value what is worth valuing, because to her is her children and their accomplishments. Because of this, she serves as a representation of Cuba, being able to see what matters in others and providing a prime example for others to live by.

Reyita's generosity was not just focused on her family, but was also extended toward her entire community. She looked after the children of prostitutes without asking for a single penny in return. She explained that she did this to prevent others from enduring the same hardships she experienced during her childhood. Additionally, she cared for children of all races, not just black children. The majority of the time, the white children she cared for came from impoverished families. This indicates that Cuban society did not only discriminate against Afro-Cubans, but also against individuals of lower social class. Reyita represents both of these socioeconomic categories, and for this, she represents the entirety of Cuba. She symbolizes multiple ways in which underrepresented individuals were marginalized, and also demonstrates how to act in order to claim agency, despite possessing traits that cannot be changed. Reyita could have used this situation to make money and live more comfortably, or could have only cared for black children and refused those of white families, but for her, everyone is equal, despite what society claims, as indicated by her desire to help all children regardless of their skin color. Not only does Reyita claim agency by deciding what to call herself and caring deeply for her family as well as the people of the community, but she goes on to further demonstrate her compassion toward the community by opening her own school called "La escolita," which eventually had 62 students. Many times, the parents of her students could not afford the monthly fee, but as one can assume, this was unimportant to Reyita. What mattered to her was that her students maintained their eagerness to learn. She helped everyone in need without thinking twice.

Towards the end of the novel, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, a definite change in tone of the narration indicates that Reyita has gained a true sense of independence. Rubiera Castillo transitions from writing very passively to using more dynamic wording. This helps demonstrate how Reyita's controlling husband, Rubiera, begins to play a smaller and smaller role in her life. She used to behave in a manner that only he would approve of, submitting to every one of his miniscule needs. However, she learns how to fend for herself and earn what she works hard for. She explains to her daughter "Your dad didn't allow me to develop myself the way I wanted, to struggle to fulfill the ambitions you all had. I couldn't do it, Rubiera wouldn't let me... he never shared the same aspirations I had" (141). Thus, she begins to distance herself from him while still respecting him as a person. She discovers her own unique methods of making money, such as teaching, cleaning, and taking care of children, knowing that it would decrease her

dependence on Rubiera. Reyita is eventually able to have electricity installed in her house and purchase a radio and refrigerator, all the while paying no attention to Rubiera's opposition. The radio in this scenario represents much more than a piece of technology. It connects Reyita to Cuban culture in a way that her husband cannot be connected. The refrigerator serves as a contradiction to the traditional role of a woman preparing food in the kitchen. The fact that Reyita bought the refrigerator with her own hard-earned money completely subverts this concept. She is even able to indulge in what she considers luxuries, and buy her daughter a satin dress for her wedding. Such instances portray the ultimate manifestation of independence in Reyita's life. She requires nothing from her husband and can obtain anything completely from her own doing.

Feminist scholar Maya Anderson, in an article focusing on the depiction of Afro-Cuban women in literature, discusses how the author's choice of wording affects the portrayal of Afro-Cuban women in her paper. As the daughter of Reyita, Rubiera shares many of the same characteristics, including skin color and gender. She has written the work through an approach that heightens the positive traits possessed by Reyita. Thus, it can be observed that Rubiera Castillo has structured the text around an authorial voice taking its cue from the strong self-identity established by Reyita herself. Through Rubiera's decision to write a novel about her mother, she creates an identity for women who previously had no identity in other testimonial works. Rubiera's ability to exemplify traits that were once completely neglected creates feelings of solidarity and unity which ultimately convey one, universal message: to portray the Afro-Cuban woman as someone who is valued and serves as a leader. Rubiera was one of the first writers to create such an image, enabling her to further strengthen Reyita's depiction as a woman of power. Roberto Zurbarano explains in an essay that changes for Afro-Cubans were not apparent in Cuba even after independence was gained in 1902, nor even after half a century of revolution until 1959. Prohibitions such as sleeping in a hotel or selling a house were eliminated, but in reality, these are not rights. He states that society has considered these to be luxuries for the Afro-Cuban population, but these are actually basic rights that all human beings should be entitled to. Thus, the elimination of such prohibitions does not add anything to the lives of Afro-Cubans, but simply acknowledges their existence. This implies that individuals with white skin color are more superior to individuals with darker skin color, which Reyita strives to disprove throughout the testimony.

Zurbano argues that although discrimination was discussed much more infrequently following the official abolition of slavery in 1886, this did not mean that it had officially ended. In fact, he argues it also became more and more accepted, and still is. He blatantly states that “Racism in Cuba has been concealed and reinforced in part because it isn’t talked about. The government hasn’t allowed racial prejudice to be debated or confronted politically or culturally, often pretending instead as though it didn’t exist” (70). He further explains how one of the most significant reasons why racism is still present even after it was abolished is because it “... is disguised and renews itself when not debated or not openly confronted politically and culturally” (71). Thus, it is through individuals like Reyita that the topic of slavery is continually alluded to and confronted. Her leadership on this subject matter provides an example for others to follow, which can be observed as a result of Rubiera Castillo’s remarkable ability to portray Reyita as an influential literary figure.

Ernesto Pérez Castillo makes a significant point in his discussion reflecting on Zurbano’s essay and providing clarification. He discusses how it seems as if black and white Cubans are equal, but in reality, it is more as if blacks have the right to be white. What no one ever discusses is how blacks do not have the right to be black. They are allowed to adapt the rights of whites but are hindered from bringing their own sociocultural practices. Pérez Castillo thus provides another viewpoint on equality and emphasizes that simply because black and white Cubans are able to participate in the same activities does not mean that they both receive the same amount of respect. Reyita’s testimony supports Pérez Castillo’s basic argument, but also brings into perspective her strong character. It is true that Reyita was not treated in the same manner as white women who were more affluent, but she does not need the respect of others to understand her own worth. She has respect for herself and that is all she needs. Her value is determined by her own opinions and not those of others.

As the testimonial Reyita shows us, Reyita, the historical woman, faced considerable suppression throughout her childhood from both her family as well as the society she grew up in. Nonetheless, she never permitted herself to be restricted by such suppressions, and considered them minor impediments which she readily surpassed. Even then, Reyita not only recognized her own worth despite the opinions of others, but also recognized the value of others through her desire to constantly serve the greater good, whether it be her family or members of her community. By the end of the novel, she is no longer governed by Rubiera and refuses to let her skin color or gender be worth any more than the superficiality they possess. She becomes the independent Afro-Cuban woman she always envisioned herself to be. Her remarkable ability to overcome society’s expectations of her make her a symbol of Revolutionary Cuba, and her remarkable literary portrayal through Castillo’s testimonial offers us a deeper critique of our received notions of “equality” in the Cuban historical context.

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