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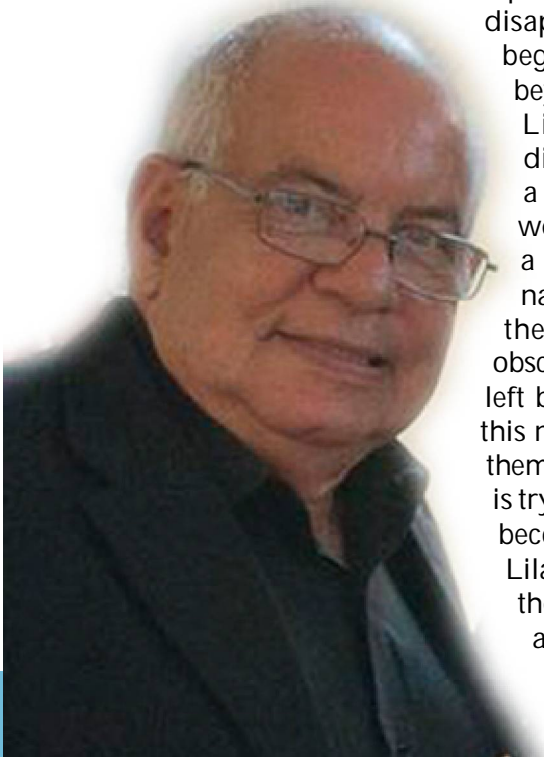
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A woman in love. A Critical Essay on the Novel by Jose Prats Sariol: Lila's Sorrows

The literature of Cuban American exile conveys in its expression the stigma of a people subjected to the rigors of a callous immigration. Although many Cuban writers are still confined to the reality of the island, there is a bridge of ideals and circumstances that allowed both literary currents to have some common point. The novel *Lila's Sorrows* written by José Prats Sariol is one of these examples. A novel written completely in Havana in 2001-2, yet the novel reflects the circumstances and ideals of a people that are broken between two possibilities: to live in the island and dream of escaping or to break away from the island and find deliverance. These two worlds are easily explored in the novels of the last decades by the Cubans in exile and those looking at the exiles from within the island itself. Nonetheless, both of these groups are, in the long run, defined by the constant evocation of a mythical land, many times, exacerbated by the way they will arrive or plan to arrive there. The narrative in *Lila's sorrows* explores two venues: the vicissitudes within the island to get to the promise land and the adjustments once they arrived in that land. Along with this fantastic force, the novel also revels in references to family memories, distant lost love and above all, the reinvention of the protagonist's life in a new land.

Lila, the main protagonist in Prats's novel, is not only the Cuban "typical balsera" that ventures into an open, dangerous ocean to come to the land of freedom, but she is the embodiment of many women whose alter ego has being reinforced by the consequences of her fate, and, in the long run, her exhaustive imagination. Lila lives in a past misconnected to a present where her life was anchored by the mistake of chronology. Using a great *Hemingwayesque* phrase to describe this condition: "*I didn't want to kiss you goodbye that was the trouble; I wanted to kiss you goodnight. And there's a lot of difference*". Hemingway had a visionary obscurity, many times, in the same way it was used by the likes of the great poets of the Italian Hermetic movement: Ungaretti and Quasimodo.

Lila's love for Valerio (ironically, bearing a name meaning worthy of some importance) is exactly what the title of this book refers to: a contradictory and inexplicable sorrow. There are not true roots to this disappointing relationship, except the fact that it had a beginning many years ago and for reasons above and beyond the metaphysical questions of time, and yearning, Lila clings on to it with magnificent madness. She disavows her quasi divine affair with Valerio by writing a profuse number of letters to the lover. The lover who, we come to know as a married man with a wife (who is a doctor named Helena) and with whom he has a child named Fernando. As the novel unravels we realize that there is not one reason for Lila's sorrows, but many obscured pieces of the same reality rooted in the memories left behind in the island where they came from: Cuba. In this novel the island is more important than the characters themselves, since the island embodies everything the writer is trying to convey to the reader. So much so, that the island becomes a part of Lila, Valerio, and many other times, Lila herself. The island is, first and most, the place where the birth of her love for Valerio began. The island is also a giant post card where one could dream of planning many comings and goings as if it were a magnificent architectural opus. The island is also the place where her best friend Virginia was born and so on. Her



justifications for the existence of the island are present from A to Z, which such power that the novel becomes, at times, a novel within a country:

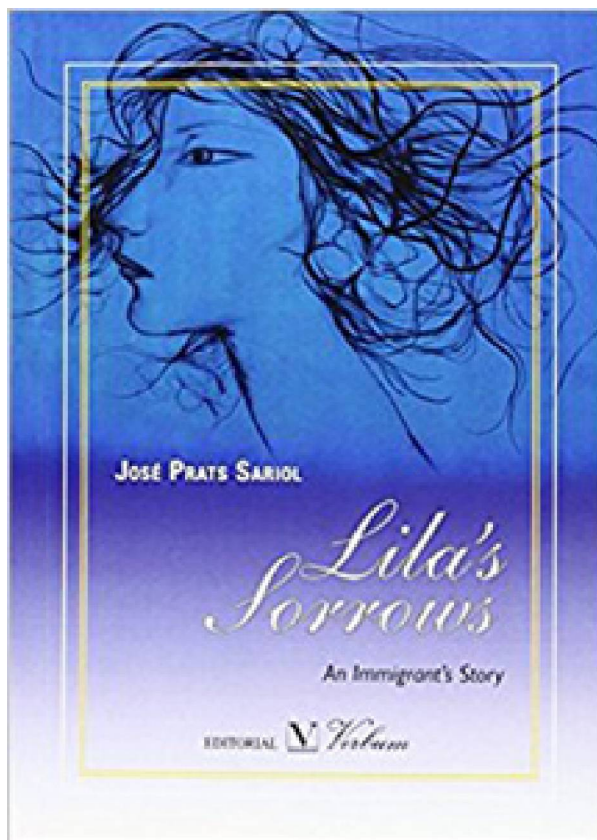
“Now I see us walking on the *Malecón* talking about getting married.” (Page 103),

“Like Cuba, you’re mine.” (Page 166).

The island also takes the face of Mother Nature at its best. This is simply understood in her relationship between Lila’s poetic qualities and her indefinable friend, Virginia. There is a rare exchange of ideas as Virginia becomes more a part of Lila and as the poetic creations assume the words and images of the friends’ relationship. Although, Valerio is not relegated to a second piece in this puzzle, in a way, he becomes the silent witness of the new mythical situation. At this point in the novel, Lila has become the prototype of all women in all possible dramatic literature in the world. She is at times Cleopatra, others, Anna Karenina, and many other times, Emma Bovary: the road to no escape.

What we begin to understand is that the end of this metaphysically enkindled woman will not have a happy ending. We know that her life is compromised to a scheme full of trivial memories and other impossibilities. We also begin to discern that the real reason for Lila to exist is entrenched in a past she has been able to move back and forth for the sake of her own survival: a woman who begins writing letters to an ex lover becomes the lover that is being scrutinized by those who live around her. We also come to know that Lila will never escape from this eternal past, since she has become herself a past within a past, where Adriano, the emperor could be reading the poems of Rosalía de Castro and the barman who reads *Leaves of Grass* could as well be playing in a piano *The Variations on a Theme* by Paganini.

As the novel unfolds, the reader will find interspersed throughout the pages the different news bulletins about the murder of two women in a residential area of Atlanta, Georgia. The announcements serve, no other purpose, than to keep the reader afloat of a possible dénouement with anticipated consequences. The dead women are the object of an investigation that throughout the whole novel sheds lights in the intimate relationship between the characters and their fate (in and out of their lives). There is also a steady and silent harmony that falls back on its rhythm every time the authenticity of the story, Lila’s letters and the news bulletin meet each other in the consequential narration. This silent tune

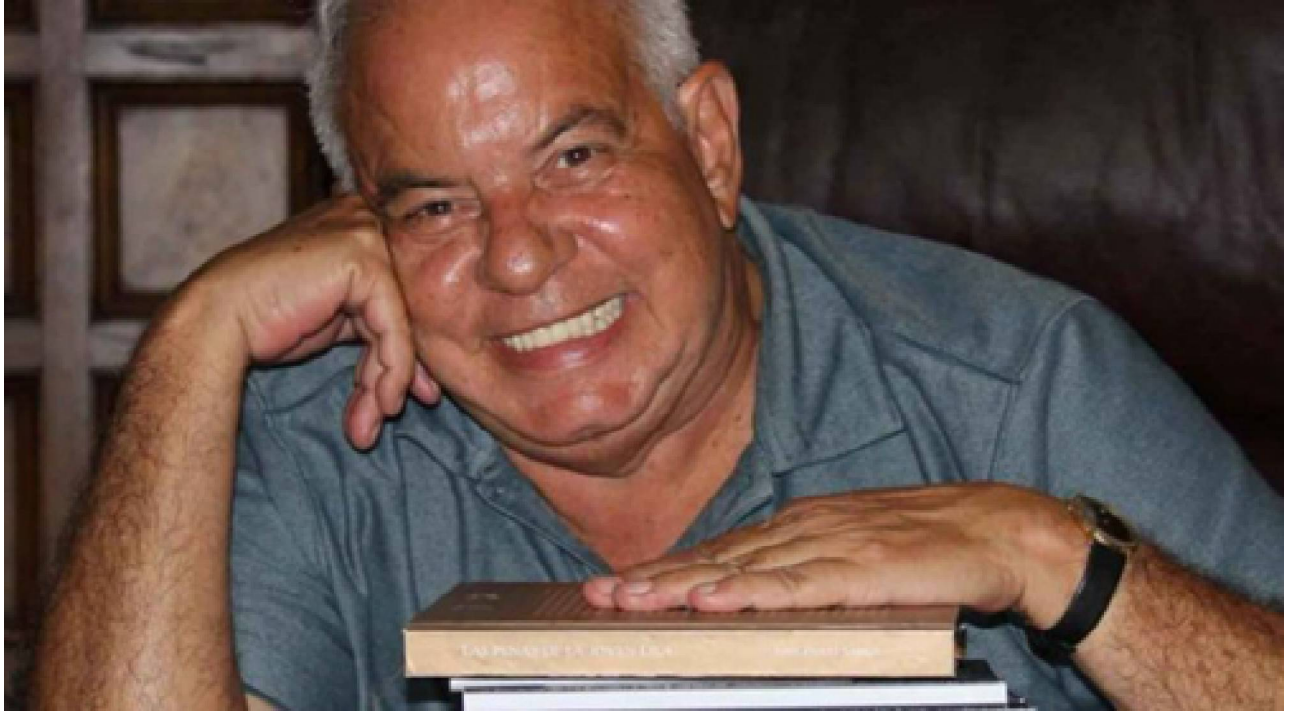


creates—in my person as a reader— a musical diagram where all the ingredients of the novel come to exist in a parallel sub world of infidelity, unrequited love, and cultural shock.

Antagonism. Lila’s Sorrow is an extensive antagonism between reality and conception, deception and truth. We are invited to witness a group of people whose only limitations are themselves and who continually are looking for a peace of mind that cannot be entrusted to them lest that this found reality could become a total opposite. The relation between what is an misapprehension and what is a possibility are lost since the beginning of the novel and we are left with nothing else, but the probability of a fatal conclusion that will encompass the *raison d’être* of this work.

The murder of the two women since the inception of the drama serves as a reminder that whatever the reader will encounter in his search for meaning will become no more than another piece of a puzzle whose end is already defined. There is also the historical past that ties all these characters to the same dilemma and whose only reality is found in the concept of the island of Cuba, which is not only distant, but the same place where all the characters fled from as they hunted for their own causality.

A glorify past. The novel is full of a historical past, both in existence and in experimentation.



The characters evoke the island of their birth every time there is a need to become an identity in space and time. For Lila, this situation is most difficult since she must share her past life with the thoughts of an old lover, Valerio, and at the same time, both are two entities experimenting the coming to a new country with the thought of something amiss. Again, the resonance of the virginal past, the innocent recollection, takes center stage in this part of the narration. There is also the essence of a memory that will out conquer the right and the wrong, even though, the probabilities are scarce. It reminds me of a quote by Haruki Muakami: "It feels good to think about you when I'm warm in bed. I feel as if you're curled up there beside me, fast asleep. And I think how great it would be if it were true."

This tedious pronouncement by Lila is simply a continuation of the search for a meaningful past that could accommodate her many "sorrows" in the present. The child is named Amadeus, just like the Austrian composer forgotten in his late years. On the other hand, Helena's name is a reminder of Helen of Troy, a most beautiful woman in Greek mythology, that although she might not be in the reality of the novel, still her name represents a challenge to the forgotten lover whose name Lila has the soft meaning of placid spirit, according to the character. Valerio can be defined by the constant presence in the novel and at the same time, the worthless lover. What we know of him is detrimental to Lila, since there is little hope that these two will ever meet again under different circumstances. Also, Valerio embodies the attraction of the opposite sex as a means to develop some consequence. Helena, or Helen of Troy is more of a attractive form (besides being the mother of his child) than the melodramatic and passive Lila whose sole purpose is keeping his reality one step ahead of this historical past, where Lila finds a niche for her unlimited sorrows. How much Valerio cares about those illusive sentiments we don't care to know.

Symbolism. The symbolism throughout the novel is present as a concealed fact, not as a reality of the drama to be encountered by the narration. There is a need by the author to show an argumentative catharsis between reality and delusion which becomes a symbol in itself as the novel unfolds. The character of Lila is the placid spirit while the character of Valerio is a given mutation of his name: the provider of nothing at all. Valerio only serves as a bridge for Lila to continue her existence in both places: here and there. This, of course, is the finest moment of the *desdoblaje* in the characterization. It is interesting to note that even in the manipulation of Virginia, the author continues the use of this authentic "*desdoblaje*" (a marvelous word in Spanish whose translation into English (open and unfold) loses its true meaning, although, its value is still preserved). This *desdoblaje* in the case of Virginia takes us to levels of contradiction between the meanings of friendship as oppose to the sexual attraction of two people. The author does not go

beyond the suggestion when he uses the *desdoblaje* in Virginia, since he probably expects the reader to do some potential thinking in relation to the plot. There is also an element of this unfolding through the levels of the many suppositions encountered in the novel, without given away the sense of mystery and backward evolution of the secret affairs, and the unrequited love.

Narrating music. This novel flows as a musical piece. We have the highs and the lows, the dramatic and the *dolcetto* o *scherzetto* developed in that “ultra space that moves within the novel”. Like notes of a musical *cantata* which open with much thundering and ends with a delicate fluid of things of the past in a forgotten present. Like the love Lila, expectations and desperations in and out of her life. There is also a strong and melodic song in the context of the narration. The past is given to us, not as a simple story, but a story that copulates with a sense of the extraordinary rhythm of some of the phrases: “Sending you an imaginary kiss”, “It’s natural that my nostalgia should be foremost in my thoughts”, “Because you occupy the first place in the ellipsis”, “No one can love you like Lila”... This exchange of semantic tunes between lines and spoken words alternate with the bulletin news as part of an *intermezzo* moving in two different directions: one for the reality, the other one, for the futility of the past. Both of these clauses commute on the same anticipation of the narration, allowing the reader to find a peaceful moment between what is being said and what is being unspoken.

Dramatic mis-en-scene. Of course, the novel is also full of many contradictions and indispositions as if it were a script created to be filmed. The larger screen is full of the sorrows that accompany the main character throughout her short life. But there is also the element of intrigue, the formidable excuse that humanity makes of itself when temptation and obliteration inundate the real world where the drama is exploited. The manipulation of the ambiance is true to the cinematic effect of each theme as it narrates the life and death of the main character. Cinematic also, in the expansion of the role playing, a pictorial force that rises in each chapter as the drama develops.

Some considerations. First, the translation at times fails to convey the real meaning of the jargon between Spanish, the language of the

author, and English, the language used to translate the work. There are instances when the proverbial Spanish lingo is lost in the translation of the written phrase, for example: “Llegamos con una mano delante y otra atrás”: “We arrived with one hand in front and one behind”; “Tenemos que esperar y ver, como dijo el ciego”. “We have to wait and see —like the blind man said”...

There is also the element of melodramatic emptiness that impinges in part of the narration with volatile consequences making the translation very visceral, with little form or logic. Of course, no one can be blamed for this. The distant evolution between the two languages, one a romance and the other a Germanic, does not make the transposition very easy for the translator, thus leaving a dream like effect of something that reads well, but lacks at times, morphological precision.

We can see this clearly, at times, in the development of Lila’s character. Lila is a woman who loves to manipulate a strong reality per se, and at the same time, she is the illusive victim of the profuse use of her imagination. This “predictable quality” renders the narration vague and misleading when the force of the language implies an image either more dramatic or less inflexible in the narrative. At times, also, the characters too, move back and forth with disoriented distress forcing the time-space sequence of the novel into a sacrificial martyrology.

Final remarks. In general, the novel is a well written novel. The translation is solid and in tuned with the safeguarding of the expression in the context of the converted language. I am fluent in both languages and have translated many times before poetry and short stories, and am convinced that this work is superlative in all respects. *Lila’s Sorrows* is a trip to the netherworld of the past infused with a present worn out by the circumstances of a group of exiles whose lives take place in a parallel sub-world very similar to the world where they all come from. At mind comes the great work of Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths*; a study on characterization where the plot becomes secondary to the consequences the protagonists may have on the work itself. In other words, the authenticity of the harsh truth takes over the illusion of the surrounding reality encroaching upon the reader the effect that there is, on this novel, very little space for true deliverance and above all, happiness.