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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Female Sexualisation in
Charles Bukowski's *Women* (1978)

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ABSTRACT [EN]

In this paper I shall examine how Charles Bukowski's *Women* (1978) displays the double nature of female sexualisation as an offensive consideration of women with harmful consequences for both, victim and tormentor. Bukowski's *Women* could be considered a semi-autobiographical production since the very author confirms it and, in consequence, the novel resembles a diary in terms of repetition and monotony with a clear component of crudity, heritage of the Dirty Realism literary movement. The male protagonist of the novel, Henry Chinaski – Bukowski's alter-ego in the majority of his novels – guides the reader through a large number of sexual experiences from a point of departure of isolation to an ending marked by a desire for stability in a relationship. In the beginning, Chinaski uses women to satisfy his sexual desire. However, he eventually seems to stop this practice noticing the negative consequences that his behaviour has upon him and those women around him. Thus, Chinaski becomes the living instance of the harmful effects of the sexual objectification of women.

KEY WORDS: Dirty Realism, female sexualisation, Herbert Marcuse, masculinity, Michael Kaufman, surplus repression.

RESUMEN [ES]

En este ensayo examinaré como la novela *Women* (1978), de Charles Bukowski, muestra la doble naturaleza de la sexualización de la mujer como una consideración ofensiva del género femenino con consecuencias terribles tanto para la víctima como para el opresor. *Women* podría considerarse, así, una producción semi-autobiográfica más parecida a un diario debido al uso de la repetición y la monotonía sumado a una crudeza hija del movimiento literario del realismo sucio. El propio autor confirma la naturaleza semi-autobiográfica de la obra. Será Henry Chinaski – el alter-ego de Bukowski en la mayoría de sus obras – quién guíe al lector a través de un sinfín de experiencias sexuales partiendo de un comienzo de soledad hacia un final marcado por el deseo de alcanzar la estabilidad dentro de una relación. Al principio, Chinaski usa a la mujer para su satisfacción sexual personal. Sin embargo, Chinaski parece abandonar este comportamiento con el tiempo dándose cuenta de las negativas consecuencias que esto conlleva para él y las mujeres que le rodean. Así, Chinaski acaba por convertirse en el vivo ejemplo de los dañinos efectos de la sexualización de la mujer.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Realismo sucio, Herbert Marcuse, masculinidad, Michael Kaufman, sexualización femenina, *surplus repression*.

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Introduction

Charles Bukowski's works have been considered highly offensive to the female gender, even misogynistic. In fact, *Women* might be considered a mere compilation of sexual relations with a never-ending number of women that does not go beyond a monotonous semi-pornographic work. However, I would like to suggest that this novel may offer more possibilities from the perspective of gender studies. Whether it was Bukowski's actual purpose or not, *Women* seems to reproduce the ambivalent nature and repercussions that the sexualisation of the female gender may have upon the very same men who effect it, represented by Henry Chinaski in this case. Thus, I would like to approach Chinaski's behaviour towards women as a liberating factor for the externalisation of his repressed desires, as well as the reason for his guilty conscience and the obstacle for the development of healthy relationships. For this purpose, firstly I will define the literary movement known as Dirty Realism and explore its means of characterisation together with Bukowski's. Thereupon I will explain Herbert Marcuse's concept of *surplus repression* and Michael Kaufman's theory on men's violence, which can be perfectly applied to Chinaski's case. Lastly, I will analyse Chinaski's evolution in relation to the sexual objectification of the female gender in the novel.

1. A Brief Overview of Dirty Realism and the Case of Bukowski's Female Characterisation

Beyond characters such as the alcoholics and the unemployed, it could be suggested that Charles Bukowski was identified among the Dirty Realism writers because of his controversial characterisation of women (Hemmingson 15). Among the range of characterisations allowed by this genre, Bukowski focused on a harsh and often considered misogynist portrayal of women, which chased him in life and after his death (Goodman). In

this way, Bukowski's identification with the Dirty Realism literary movement seems to lie in his selection and treatment of characters.

1.1. Dirty Realism Literature and Character Model

Born in the early 1980s, Dirty Realism has been considered to have its origin in the "bizarre world" that the Second World War generated and has been defined as a reaction against the embellishment of reality in literature, which focused on "local details" (Gray 601; Hemmingson 11). From this point of view, it is not hard to imagine that the main protagonists of this literature should be everyday people; what has been called the "common person, but unlike the common man" of realist writers such as Malamud (Hemmingson 11). Here Michael Hemmingson is trying to be specific when regarding the idea of the *common man* of Dirty Realism, referring more precisely to workers from the low-middle class, the unemployed and the "beaten-down-by-life" (11). Thus, Dirty Realism would stand for the blunt depiction of a harsh reality by means of its sufferers.

1.2. Bukowski's Character Model: Portrayal of Hostile and Sexualised Women

Focusing now on Bukowski, it may be said that he did not just portray women following the *beaten-down-by-life* pattern established by Dirty Realism but went one step further in his non-idealized portrayal of female characters. In fact, as it will be expounded hereafter, it could be considered that there are just two main patterns that Chinaski follows when analysing female characters: women as hostile individuals or sexualised objects (Korhonen 9, 17). According to this, it has been suggested that Bukowski leaves no room for a female audience to be positively identified with any of his female characters (Korhonen 11).

First of all, according to Jani Korhonen, Chinaski's point of departure when considering women is "extremely objectifying", being clearer in Bukowski's early productions and

becoming softer (although not invisible) in modern works such as *Women* (17). In this way, a woman's value seems to rely almost entirely on her physicality, sexual performance or as an object for the satisfaction of men's sexual desire (Korhonen 17). In fact, it has been argued that Bukowski's female characterisation even follows a "stylistic pattern" based on the description of hair, clothing, and the evaluation of "physical qualities" and attractiveness of every new woman who is introduced in the novels (Leinonen 67).

Furthermore, female characters not only represent sexual objects but also hostile entities that Chinaski has to face and *suffer* in Bukowski's novels (Korhonen 9); such would be the case of Lydia Vance in *Women*. This hostility is mainly represented by means of what Chinaski considers unfaithful, aggressive and "predatory" women (Korhonen 9). This happens in such a way that, even in the *best-case scenario*, Chinaski defines *good women* as *soul thieves* and rejects them as a pernicious influence in *Women* (Bukowski 76). Thence, women seem to be condemned to a negative depiction in Bukowski's novels in any case.

In conclusion, it could be acknowledged that Bukowski moves from the Dirty Realism characterisation canon of the *common person* towards emphasising the characterisation of an adverse female in his novels. Thus, women seem not to be just part of the description of a non-idealised society but characters limited to the fields of hostility and sex in Bukowski's novels.

2. Michael Kaufman on Masculinity and Men's Violence and the Case of Charles Bukowski

In his book, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*, David Charlson states that Bukowski's work and life could be closely related to Michael Kaufman's theory about the construction of masculinity and men's violence (51). Charlson approaches concepts such as misogyny, masculinity and violence against women by means of Kaufman's

theory (51). Since this essay will examine the processes and effects of female sexualisation as a sort of violent response to sexual and emotional repression in Bukowski's novel *Women*, Kaufman's theory will be expounded hereafter as the main theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of the novel.

2.1. Michael Kaufman on the Source and Explanation of Men's Violence

In order to analyse Kaufman's theory, the first step is to approach the concepts of *surplus repression* and *masculinity*. According to Kaufman, "violence is the result of what Herbert Marcuse called the "surplus repression" of our sexual and emotional desires" (2). For Marcuse, *surplus repression* is opposite to *basic repression*; while the second represents a natural repression of human instincts, *surplus repression* refers literally to "the restrictions necessitated by social domination" (Farr). This repression is produced by the limitations of *masculinity* creating a hostile response portrayed in Bukowski's novel, *Women*. Furthermore, Kaufman puts forward the idea that *masculinity* is a detrimental social construct involving oppressive forms of behaviour (2, 4, 14). More precisely, *masculinity* is defined as the assertion of male genitalia, power and activity (Kaufman 10). In this way, it is possible to understand *masculinity* as the oppressive social structure and *surplus repression* as the unnatural repression of human desires developed in response.

Once aware of these two concepts, Kaufman's approach to violence as the product of this repression caused by *masculinity* becomes evident. This ultimately means that men's violence is originally based on *masculinity* throughout the different stages in the life of men: its construction and reinforcement (Kaufman 2, 5, 7). Hence, the influence of *masculinity* in childhood and adolescence, according to Kaufman and in relation with Bukowski's self-experience, will be explained hereafter as the basis for the following analysis of Bukowski's novel.

Primarily, childhood is described by Kaufman as the point of origin for the development of *masculinity*. According to Kaufman, childhood is a “prolonged period of powerlessness” in which the child establishes “the basis for lifelong masculinity” (5). The crucial point is that the child rejects passivity and powerlessness (related here to the figure of the mother) and claims for himself “the activity represented by the father [as an example of violence]” (Kaufman 6). Following the same path, Bukowski’s personal childhood does not seem to differ much from what has been exposed. As a matter of fact, Bukowski’s father not only represented a despotic figure of authority but also the embodiment of a cruel physical violence towards his own son from a very early age (Dullaghan). Besides, Bukowski portrays his mother as a passive component of the couple (Dullaghan). In this way, childhood seems the perfect *breeding ground* for future violence and Bukowski’s was not an exception but quite an example of it.

Later on with the advent of adolescence, what Kaufman calls “the reinforcement of masculinity” takes place (7). Throughout this stage, the boy would repress all traces of *femininity*, deeply related to passivity here (Kaufman 7). According to this, the boy becomes aware of the proximity of adulthood and responds, in relation to his already inherited *masculinity*, with a search for power represented by the fulfilment of sexual desire restricted to heterosexuality (Kaufman 7, 10). However, in Bukowski’s case, it may be said that his severe case of *acne vulgaris* and his lack of contact with women, until his *violent* first sexual experience at the age of twenty four, stopped him from externalising his *masculine desires* for power (Dullaghan). Therefore, puberty is depicted as the moment when domination patterns towards women begin to appear. In the case of Bukowski, adolescence turned out to be an extreme instance of the repression of *masculinity*.

2.2. Men's Violence: Men vs. Women, Men vs. Men and Men vs. Self

At this point, Kaufman claims that all the violence produced by this *surplus repression* is externalised by men against other men, against women and against themselves (2). Due to the purposes of this paper, just the last two sections of this violence will be explored. Firstly, violence against women is defined as “the most common form of direct personalized violence” in adults, being closely related to sexual domination with the sole purpose of the perpetuation of *masculinity* through the differentiation from *femininity* (Kaufman 8, 9). Secondly, men's violence against themselves is explained as the reaction against the impossibility of releasing their emotional baggage within the strict constraints of *masculinity* (Kaufman 12). This situation generates symptoms such as “guilt” and “self-hate” (Kaufman 12). In this manner, it can be stated that *masculinity* establishes patterns of disorder for both victim and tormentor.

To sum up, Kaufman's theory sets out the idea that *surplus repression* of sexual and emotional desires is the source of men's violence and that *masculinity* is the reason for it. Moreover, *masculinity* originates in childhood; from there it is reinforced and developed from puberty onwards. Eventually, this violence finds its expression in adulthood against both men and women.

3. Sexualisation of Women: Henry Chinaski's Double-Edged Sword

Moving to the analysis of *Women*, I will focus on the double nature of Chinaski's derogatory and sexualised understanding and treatment of women, which seems to be the source of both his happiness and woe. Following the unfolding of the plot, the point of departure differs from the end in that Chinaski's perception of women and future perspectives regarding relationships have changed. In this manner, it could be possible to think of a

positive evolution of Chinaski, who eventually realizes the pernicious consequences that the result of his *surplus repression* of desires has upon him and those around him. Thus, throughout this analysis I will explore the inception, evolution and diverse consequences of Chinaski's sexualisation of female characters.

3.1. Female Sexualisation as Liberation of Repressed Desires

Chinaski is introduced to the reader for the first time as an old man who seems to be ignorant—to some extent—to concepts such as love and sex, even though he has been married and claims to have been in love at least once (1). In fact, Chinaski's ignorance will be corroborated later on in the novel: "It was my childhood, you see. No love, no affection. And in my twenties and thirties there also was very little. I'm playing catch-up [sex]. . . ." (253). In this sense, Chinaski's background leads the reader towards the idea of a possible repression of emotional and sexual desires from an early age. This connects to Kaufman's idea of childhood as a prolonged period of repression of emotional desires and adolescence as a time for the externalisation of these desires – including sexual desires here, something that Chinaski confesses not to have gone through, which appears similar to Bukowski's self-experience as well. In a way, Chinaski's point of departure in the novel may equate to the *surplus repression* of emotional and sexual desires increased by the impossibility of externalisation throughout puberty and onwards.

However, the repression of his sexual desires comes to an end soon when Chinaski begins to experience a sudden and large contact with women due to his little recently acquired fame in the field of literature. From here on, Chinaski embarks on an endless number of sexual encounters with different types of *beaten-down-by-life women*: alcoholics, divorcees, drug addicts, prostitutes, etc. This period of Chinaski's life could be considered a *second adolescence* or the opportunity that he never had to unleash his repressed desires: "I was

fucking all the women and girls I had gazed longingly after on the sidewalks of Los Angeles in 1937 . . . (218). Besides, by knowing that Kaufman attributed male violence towards women to the imposition of *masculine* power, Chinaski's treatment of women as sexual objects may be easily regarded as a long-sought-after *masculine* desire for power by means of sexual domination, bordering on sexual abuse in some cases. Mercedes, being apparently forced by Chinaski to have sex, would be a good example (167). Hence, it may be said that, from this moment of *liberation* onwards, Chinaski's understanding and treatment of women is completely influenced by his extreme case of *surplus repression* of sexual desires and the consequent lust for power that *masculinity* involves according to Kaufman.

Following this process of female sexualisation, it seems that Chinaski reduces human relationships to mere interaction based on sex: "Human relationships were strange. I mean, you were with one person a while, eating and sleeping . . . and then it stopped . . . then another woman arrived, and you ate with her and fucked her . . ." (100). Thereby, Chinaski wrongly concludes that sexual attributes are the right ones to look for when considering a possible partner in a relationship. The result is a poor description of women as sexual objects only desired for that purpose. Moreover, when female characters get out of this framework, they are only regarded as hostile obstacles, in the case of Lydia, or prudish females, in the case of Cecelia. It is important to highlight here that Chinaski accepts sex as a source of happiness and rejects women in any other sense: "Death to all whores who keep their legs closed against me!" (182). Thus, Chinaski keeps going on satisfying his lust as if this meant the ultimate way for happiness.

3.2. Female Sexualisation as Hindrance for the Development of Relationships

Nonetheless and against the odds, it may be said that Chinaski slowly moves from the sexual objectification of women to a more empathetic and human consideration of them,

becoming aware of the repercussions of his behaviour. In fact, Chinaski holds a significant monologue when he is to decide whether to spend Thanksgiving with Iris, the young woman he barely knows, or Debra, a caring woman to whom he had already promised to pass the day with: “What was my motive? . . . I wasn't considering anything but my own selfish, cheap pleasure” (245). Here, there is neither sign of power imposition nor hostile or sexual portrayal of the female characters involved. Instead, Chinaski is acknowledging that his behaviour is unethical by means of auto-criticism. This episode could represent one of the first steps towards a fair treatment of females based on Chinaski's self-awareness of his behaviour.

Once he is fully aware of his selfish behaviour, Chinaski's self-hate appears as a second step on the positive evolution of the character's morality. As noted by Kaufman, what he called *violence against one-self* was mainly produced by the impossibility of discharging emotions in *passive* ways such as crying or trembling (12). Nonetheless, from my point of view, Chinaski's self-rejection could be caused by something else. It is true that Chinaski displays traces of low self-esteem from the beginning of the novel, which could be attributed to the lack of emotional release. However, in my opinion, Chinaski's self-hate goes beyond Kaufman's explanation by feeling guilty because of his own consideration of women and the consequences of his acts:

“‘[To Debra] I can't be with you Thanksgiving.’ / ‘[To Chinaski] Why? Why? What's wrong?’ / ‘What's wrong is that I am a GIANT HUNK OF SHIT!’ My guilt screwed inside me and I had a spasm. It hurt something awful. ‘A belly dancer is flying down from Canada to spend Thanksgiving with me.’ . . . / ‘Is she beautiful?’ / ‘Yes, she is. I'm sorry, I'm *sorry* . . . ’” (250).

Thence, Chinaski suffers from his own choice of acting out of sexual-interest and, for the first time in the novel, he expresses his feelings by means of a *passive* way of externalisation: “I

started to tremble and cry” (250). Therefore, female sexualisation ultimately represents a source of sorrow for him and his main hindrance for developing healthy and stable relationships, as in the case of Debra.

Nevertheless, Chinaski remains hopelessly unable to change his toxic life style. It is just at the end of the novel when the reader can vaguely appreciate Chinaski’s actual determination to establish a formal relationship with a woman: “Sara deserved much better treatment than I was giving her. It was up to me now” (303). Moreover, for the first time in the novel Chinaski rejects a sexual invitation as a symbol of change and respectful consideration of Sara as a couple: “I hung up. There I had done it—that time . . . It was going to be a good night for Chinaski” (304). At this time, he even embraces a good consideration of himself leaving behind his previous self-rejection, the product of *masculinity*’s oppression and his guilty conscience: “I was a good guy . . .” (304). Thus, Chinaski seems to have finally started the overcoming of his sexual objectification of women – to a certain extent – by focusing his attention on the construction of a healthy relationship rather than in the immediate satisfaction of his sexual desires. Reinforcing my statement, Bukowski himself acknowledged in an interview that *Women* was based on a similar evolution he experienced (Dullaghan).

To sum up, in this analysis of *Women* I have attempted to manifest the double nature of the sexual objectification of women regarding the man who exerts it. On the one hand, it represents Chinaski’s liberation and alleged reason for contentment based on the fulfilment of sexual desires. On the other hand, it has been shown that female sexualisation truly stands for his main source of misery and obstacle for real happiness, feeling dreadfully guilty and not being able to build a relationship while holding such a disrespectful behaviour. This idea has been disclosed through Chinaski’s moral evolution from a positive embracement to the

rejection of female sexual objectification, which ultimately has been proved not only to be a degrading consideration of the female gender but also a noxious perspective with no possible positive outcomes, not even for the tormentor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, female sexualisation in *Women* has been explored by means of Bukowski's sexualised characterisation of women within the Dirty Realism canon together with Marcuse's concept of *surplus repression* and Kaufman's theory on men's violence in relation to *masculinity*. The findings of this study have proved that Bukowski's novel could be regarded as a perfect example of the ambivalent and detrimental nature of female sexualisation through Chinaski's evolution in his consideration of women. Thus, it has been displayed how female sexualisation essentially signifies decay and ruin for the very man who performs it, even though sexual objectification may appear as a liberating response for the repression of sexual and emotional desires in a very first moment. Therefore, even if it is not clear whether Bukowski's ultimate purpose in *Women* was to criticise female sexualisation or not, the novel does contain the necessary information to explore the harmful effects of female sexualisation for the tormentor. Consequently, as it was suggested in the introduction of this paper, *Women's* potential should be reconsidered and examined as a detailed portrayal of the tormentor's psychology, rather than just a mere semi-pornographic or misogynistic work.

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