**FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA'S *YERMA* (1937) AND RUTH
CARTER'S *A YEARNING* (1999): THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN
THROUGH SPACE AND TIME**

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***Abstract:** My paper examines Lorca's Yerma and Carter's A Yearning and the transposition of the work from a regressive agricultural Andalusia into a traditional urban British-Asian Punjabi community. Though written in different periods and cultures, the two plays illustrate that discrimination and domestic entrapment of women have prevailed. The heroines' inability to fulfil their socially required roles, to procreate, condemns them to seclusion and desperation with a violent outcome.*

***Keywords:** Adaptation, A Yearning, Carter, Lorca, Punjabi community, Yerma.*

1. Introduction

This article establishes a comparison between Lorca's *Yerma* and Carter's *A Yearning*, the latter being an adaptation of Lorca's play and a transposition from Andalusia in the 1930s to a contemporary multicultural Punjabi community in Britain. The play was performed in 1995 by the Asian theatre company Tamasha ("commotion" in Hindi), in collaboration

with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company. Tamasha was founded in 1989 by director Kristine Landon-Smith and actor/playwright Sudha Bhuchar; their aim is to intersect Asian culture with mainstream British culture. Plays such as *East is East*, by Ayub Khan-Din, or *The Trouble with Asian Men*, by Landon-Smith, Bhuchar and Louise Wallinger, have played a key role in opening up largely unknown worlds to British audiences.

Ruth Carter is well known for a number of film scripts and adaptations. In her adaptation of Lorca's *Yerma*, Carter "revisits and revisions a 'canonical' text" (Aston 1999:249), dramatizing the subject of childlessness and ardently-desired motherhood. Lorca's *Yerma* is transformed into Amar and her husband Juan into Jaz, a Glaswegian Asian. The setting in *Yerma* is rural Andalusia, while Carter's play unfolds in urban Birmingham, where Lorca's shepherd is converted into the owner of a thriving taxi firm.

Andalusia, Lorca's native soil, was still a regressive society in the 1940s. *Yerma*, together with *Blood Wedding* (1933) and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936, but published posthumously in 1946), are often referred to as "rural plays". In them Lorca questions various aspects of bourgeois morality, such as its destructive myths, hypocrisy, and discrimination against women in male-dominated Spanish society. *The House of Bernarda Alba*, subtitled "A Drama of Women in the villages of Spain", is a straightforward indication of Lorca's critique. He intended it to be "a photographic documentary", as stated in an introductory note to the play: a true reflection of the Andalusian and, by extension, the universal Spanish society of his time in which strict customs, such as honour and decency, were the cause of profound physical and moral suffering. Furthermore, the author drew many elements from the intermingled cultures

of Andalusian history, covering a period of over two millennia: pre-Roman (Tartessian, Phoenician), Roman, Christian, Jewish and Islamic. Besides this, there are reminiscences of magical thinking, resembling those of ancient religions with their pagan rites. Lorca became significantly obsessed with the *pena negra* (black pain) mentioned in Andalusian folk music lyrics, *cante jondo*, a fusion of Arab, Jewish and Gypsy music. This pain with no apparent cause is a historical pain, a torrent of suffering, of social and racial injustices and curses, flowing into the culture of a country and transmitted from generation to generation. It is “an incurable pain, the black pain we cannot get rid of except by taking a knife and opening a deep buttonhole in our left side” (Maurer 1992:xxiv).

2.1. *Yerma* – Male Control and Women’s Repression

The opening of the play presents the typical image of a woman in Lorca’s time, confined to her home, a sewing basket at her feet. Yerma is dreaming and visualizing a shepherd leading a child by the hand, which reveals her desire for motherhood. However, her very name points to her tragic destiny, since Yerma means “barren” in Spanish. United to the earth by her very name, Yerma is described as a daughter of Nature. While able to enjoy Nature’s splendour, at the same time she forms part of its sterile process.

In Lorca’s traditional Spain, marriage demanded reproduction in order for the wife to be fully defined as a married woman. After two years, Yerma is still desperately waiting for a pregnancy. Her physical barrenness, produced by the emotional atrophy of her husband, Juan, has caused a dramatic emptiness in Yerma, one she needs to fill with a child. Interestingly, Lorca chose metaphors relating procreation to the field and to

seed. The woman is like a field, waiting for the male to deliver the seed. Men have to tend and control their “field” because their power depends on possession of this field. Unfortunately, Juan’s main concern lies in the accumulation of actual land. His focus on material goods is counterbalanced by the procreative vacuum experienced in Yerma, and the idea that her “field”, her body, may remain barren is assuming the form of an obsession. Following the logic of agricultural law, Yerma believes that if the field lacks water, it remains unproductive. Therefore, the metaphorical title of the play refers not to a sterile field but to a barren field unproductive because it is untended.

Yerma projects procreation on to a cosmic scale by observing that even stone “procreates”, even hedge mustard flowers (1992:68). The brutal contradiction between cosmic laws and nature’s disorder produces a serious identity crisis. She considers herself a parody in the midst of nature’s beauty and productivity, her belly, breasts and blood having lost their meaning. The following words are spoken “*as if in a dream*”:

[...] O blind breasts under my clothing!
O doves without eyes, doves without whiteness!
The stinging pain of imprisoned blood
Nails hornets to the nape of my neck!
But surely you’ll come, my love, my son!
As the sea gives salt, and the earth bears grain,
Our womb will swell with a tender child,
Like a cloud which brings the sweet, fresh rain (93).

Juan is troubled not by Yerma’s frustration but by the danger of losing control over his “field” caused by her absences from home to seek solace in nature. Reacting to gossip, Juan insists on his honour, based solely

on appearances, which is the upholding of his power over her. He tries to confine her to the house, threatening to lock her up, “because that’s what a husband is for!” (92-3) Yerma becomes a prisoner in her own house, watched by her husband and his sterile spinster sisters. Significantly, she compares her house to a tomb, and the sensation of imprisonment intensifies as the play progresses. The couple are trapped in the vicious circle of their incompatibilities, having married for convenience. They are bound both by social tradition and by the inflexible code of honour. Honour is, in fact, a central theme in *Yerma*. Not considering the possibility of procreation outside marriage, owing to her virtue and moral rectitude, Yerma had accepted the hierarchical nature of the marital order and agreed willingly to her father’s selection of a husband.

As a last act of desperation, Yerma hurries to a soothsayer, desiring to participate in the tragic fertility rite in the Sanctuary. She joins the Chorus of six barren women, who start the rite by beseeching Christ to “let all the roses bloom” over the “withered flesh” (106). Their songs are full of sensuality and passion, praising the magic of love. The fertility rites “are based in part on the yearly pilgrimage to Moclín, in the province of Granada, but Lorca easily convinces us of their wholly pagan character” (Maurer 1992:xxii). In fact, an ancient fertility myth is re-enacted through the wild dance of a He-goat and She-goat, the former seizing a horn of a bull, an obvious phallic symbol, with which he pursues the female.

At the end of the pilgrimage the Pagan Old Woman blames Yerma’s husband and his ancestors for her barrenness, as they do not behave “like a breed of real men” (112). Her invitation to Yerma to copulate with her son provokes her bitter complaint:

I'm like a parched field big enough to hold a thousand teams of oxen plowing, and what you give me is a little glass of water from the well! Mine is pain that is no longer of my flesh! (112)

When Yerma is reproved by her husband at the end of the ritual scene, the hope she had felt during the enactment of the fertility myth vanishes, giving way to violent frustration. His unexpected desire to possess her sexually provokes her final sense of desolation, because she feels pursued rather than loved. In a mortal embrace, she chokes her husband to death, depriving him of the air he had metaphorically taken from her in their marriage. Her inability to conceive has turned Yerma into an irrational creature. Her husband's death signifies the end of her hope, as she proclaims:

Barren. Barren, but sure. Now I know it for certain. And alone. [...] With my body dry forever. [...] I have killed myself, have killed my son (115).

As in Greek tragedy, Lorca makes frequent use of a Chorus to underline the tragic Fate of his characters. At the end of the play, the pilgrims' chorus is heard, which evokes Yerma's hope as contrasting with her final tragedy, that of being incarcerated. Her pain can be defined as Lorca's *pena negra*, as it is deeper than her previous longing for a child, which "has given way to something much more difficult to define" (Maurer 1992:xxv). Maurer (xxv) has rightly observed that "Yerma's tragedy is *not* that society keeps her from fulfilling a biological urge or realizing herself fully. It is that she can desire, can imagine and feel what is absent". Lorca has here portrayed the frustration of women who feel suffocated because they are not allowed to realize themselves as human beings. His humanism

and liberalism make use of poetry to put forward his “appeal for justice, for freedom and for sexual and social equality” (Maurer:xxv).

2.2. *A Yearning* – Domestic Entrapment in the Punjabi Community

It is over eighty years since the first presentation of *Yerma*. Fortunately, since then the situation for women even in rural Andalusia has improved. Medical treatment has succeeded in remedying numerous cases of infertility or sterility, and in addition it is now socially accepted that a woman is not obliged to endure a loveless marriage for ever. Conversely, in many parts of the world women still suffer oppression and injustice in a male-dominated society, as demonstrated by *A Yearning*. Carter’s play is set, as mentioned above, in a British Punjabi community. London-Smith, the director of Tamasha, explains:

The Punjabi community in Britain does not seem to have lost connection with its rural roots. It is almost as though the community, in an effort to retain its culture against a foreign landscape, is even more traditional than the Punjabi community in Indian society today (Programme notes, 26 September 1995).

In such a community, as Patel (1998:262-3) states, “[t]he choice for women who dare break out of the very narrow confines of the roles prescribed by religion and culture is stark; either they remain within the parameters of permissible behaviour, or they transgress and risk becoming pariahs within their own community”.

Amar, the heroine of the play, has left her Indian birthplace to marry Jaz, as arranged by her father, and to live in a Punjabi community in Birmingham. Aston (1999:249) defines Amar appropriately as a “cross-border figure” as she has had to cross borders in order to settle in Britain

and to contend with the geo-social dislocation brought about by her marriage. The play shows the intricacy of multicultural Britain through Jaz, a Glaswegian Punjabi living in Birmingham, the owner of a minicab company, yet adhering to traditional Indian culture by accepting an Indian bride in an arranged marriage. He acts in accordance with the Punjabi community's socio-cultural rules that accord young women hardly any value except that of serving male needs and confine them to their domestic spheres. Griffin (2003:145) describes the customs of a Bengali community in Britain, which to my mind can be extrapolated to the British Punjabi community: "[A] man's public life and relationship with his male peers in his community is much more significant in his life than his relationship with his wife". Griffin refers further to women's lack of freedom in the Asian communities in Britain: "Their freedom is severely curtailed, and their emotional wellbeing depends to some extent on the relationships they can build with other women in their households and communities" (145).

In fact, the British Punjabi Community is organised as an all-party group and is acknowledged in Parliament as the voice of the Punjabi community. It is estimated that there are nearly a million people of Punjabi origin in Britain, Punjabi being the country's second language. Britain "allows the state to mediate between itself and minority communities, using so-called 'community leaders' as power-brokers and middle-men" (Patel 1998:263). Ali (1992 in Patel: 263) states further: "Needless to say, such leaders are male, from religious, business and other socially conservative background, who, historically, have had little or no interest in promoting an agenda for social justice and equality, least of all the rights of Asian women". It should be mentioned that in the UK there have been debates since the 1970s concerning arranged or forced marriages among Asian

women, with these being regarded as “antithetical to the gender equality, individual autonomy and self-determination, freedom of choice, and liberalism that supposedly govern British culture” (Griffin 2003:146).

Indeed, Carter’s play stages precisely “the pressures facing young Asian women caught between the traditional ways of India and living in a multi-cultural Britain” (Aston 2003:138). Carter does not therefore represent “Amar’s move to Britain [...] as an ‘advance’ on a ‘backward’ Indian home; rather, the play shows the complexities of a cross-cultural, inter-national oppression that ultimately positions Amar as isolated, friendless and desperate” (Aston 138).

The opening of the play illustrates the hybridity that exists in multiculturalism. “AMAR *is sleeping on a settee facing a TV set on which a Hindi video movie plays. A sewing machine with sari material has been abandoned* (1995:7). The scene shows the juxtaposition of a modern home – a settee, a TV – with Indian culture – a Hindi video movie and the eye-catching colour of Indian material such as a sari. At the same time, the opening introduces the main issue of the play, a yearning for motherhood. Amar is dreaming about a crying baby. Her craving for a child is placed in contrast with her husband’s “exclusive concern with reproducing capital and not family” (Aston 2003:139). He proudly proclaims: “Next year maybe I can take on another cab. Luckily we don’t have children to lay out on” (8).

Amar’s desperate clinging to him is offset by his apparent coldness. He wants to bind her to the house, sewing and watching videos: “I don’t like you out of doors on your own. [...] Women get raped” (10). An opportune ring on his mobile phone serves as an excuse for him to depart quickly, leaving a desperate Amar behind. The opening scene of Lorca’s *Yerma* is even more emblematic, revealing another important, probably unconscious

longing. In Yerma's dream, she sees a shepherd who stares at her, "*lead(ing) a child dressed in white by the hand* (1992:67). The shepherd is Victor, whom she intuitively loves and whom she associates with the cheerful spring light, warmth and vigour of Nature, water and fertility, as opposed to her husband's aridity and coldness.

Carter has maintained most of Lorca's poetic speech and plot line, although, naturally, she has adapted it to the modern period and to the speech of English city life mixed with allegorical Indian language. When Amar is alone, she "*strokes her belly as she sings to it. The song begins in Punjabi and melts into English*" (10).

AMAR. From where do you come, my love, my child?
[...] When, my child will you come? [...]
Inside me a cradle awaits you
My womb, aching for you
When, my child, will you come? (10)

Confined to her home, and living in an Indian Diaspora, Amar seeks the companionship of the female Punjabi community, and the women, in turn, come to her house to benefit from her sewing skills. At the same time, she can enjoy women's talk and emotional comfort through the articulation of her deepest problems, which always concern her barrenness. Darshna, one of her closest friends, feels embarrassed when she reveals to Amar that "[i]t finally happened" (11), that she is expecting. She feels discomfited by Amar's inquisitiveness as she asks her to disclose to her what the couple were feeling when it happened. Filled with pity for her, she uses a beautiful allegorical comparison to explain the sensation in her womb: "'Look, have you ever held a live bird shut in your hand?' [...] Well it's the same, but in

your blood” (12). In this way, Darshna’s happiness and poetic description of pregnancy establishes a contrast with Amar’s longing for a child and her growing despair. Amar confesses:

[...] two years and twenty days is too long for me to wait. Eaten up with longing, counting each day, waiting each month. Inside me, I’m wasting away. [...]. If I go on like this, I’ll go mad (13).

In fact, as Amar is “surrounded by child-bearing women from her community” (Aston 1999:249), her obsession with her childless situation grows. Clashing with her husband’s insensibility to her yearning, she also suffers pressure from her Indian family and the Punjabi community, who expect her to bear children. Arvind, Amar’s beloved and humorous cousin (the counterpart to Victor in *Yerma*), entreats her to follow Darshna’s example, because “[t]his house needs a child.” He tries to lighten the mood by repeating the words of Sarbjit Kaur, their relation in India: “... tell her [...] in the conception department melon is very fortifying for ladies. [...] [T]ell her to put a tikka behind *both* ears” (15; emphasis original). He leaves a message for Jaz “to think less about work” and “to dig deeper!” (15). When he departs, Amar sings to herself, first in English, then in Punjabi:

Deeper! Much deeper!
My child, it’s true
I’m torn and broken in for you.
My womb and empty cradle aches for you,
When, my child, when will you come (16).

Gradually, Amar loses her self-esteem, and this is “rooted in her ‘failure’ to conceive, to become a mother”. Indeed, “[A] *Yearning* shows,

and is critical of, the extent to which the identity of the young Asian wife is bound up in a maternal identity” (Aston 1999:250). In this sense, Amar exclaims: “A Punjabi girl who doesn’t produce sons – she is as useless as a handful of husks” (36). Aston (250) explains further that “[t]he pressure on young Asian women to conceive early in marriage was researched for the play through women’s organizations. One Asian reviewer explained:

According to Neeru Desai, chairman of the Harrow Women’s Association, [...] there is pressure on the young wife to produce the first child fairly quickly. If after a year or two of marriage, there isn’t a child, people start asking questions. It’s usually the women’s fault, even if in medical terms it isn’t (in Aston, 250).

In fact, Jaz is incapable of admitting that *he* is to blame for Amar’s childlessness. Lacking empathy with her desperate condition, and obsessed with his reputation, he unreasonably accuses a blameless Amar of vice and lunacy:

I enter the office, everybody goes quiet. [...] My regular customers, they’re not friendly like they used to be with me. [...] There’s a look in their eye. Why? You tell me why? (45)

He can put up with the lack of a child, but he cannot endure Amar’s absences from home that give rise to gossip. Undoubtedly, *A Yearning* deconstructs ‘the construction of the homogenous Asian family’ which ‘hides other realities, power relations and power struggles between different caste, class and ethnic groups, and especially between men and women’ (Patel 1998:261). Like Lorca’s Juan in *Yerma*, Jaz wants to exert his power and control over Amar. “She is the slave”, as Aston (1999:250) puts it, “the colonized ‘other’, who endorses his position as colonizer/master”. Jaz seems

to resent woman's power to create new life, and he therefore has to protect himself against her powers by keeping her subjugated (Horney in Rich (1984:114). Amar is controlled by her husband and by his frustrated spinster sisters, who are ordered to spy on her in a home that has become an unbearable prison.

Most of the women of the community, though at first they were friendly, turn against Amar and join in spreading rumours about her supposed infidelity and madness. Echoing the function of Lorca's women in *Yerma*, the women in Carter's play represent a kind of Greek chorus, with a degree of dissonance among their voices as some of them express their dissatisfaction with the traditional role expected of Asian women - to bear children and to cook samosas for their husbands. Astonishingly, and I here agree with Aston, "[t]he strongest objection to the social construction of the Asian wife/mother from within the female community comes from the voice of the old woman" (1999:251), who raises a critical, feminist voice. It is interesting to note that Lorca's "old woman" bears the epithet "pagan", which in my view stands precisely for her liberal attitude as opposed to a more conventional, Christian outlook.

Amar meets the Old Woman in a littered city park during one of her flights from an ever more suffocating home. She discloses her deepest anguish, asking startling questions such as "Why am I like a barren desert inside?" (18) and pleading with the Old Woman to tell her what she should do to have a child. In Lorca as in Carter, we are presented with two antithetical characters. While Amar agonizes over her barrenness, the Old Woman has had two husbands and fourteen children. In her life "[c]hildren came like rain" (18). She deduces rightly that Amar's arranged marriage is loveless and passionless, and she explains to her: "Our men must give us

pleasure, unplait our hair, fondle us into the right mood, prepare us for their seed, they must make us feel like a flower thirsting for rain” (19).

During their first encounter the Old Woman speaks euphemistically, trying to make Amar comprehend the need to find another man and to abandon a husband “whose rotten seed brings nothing but tears!” (21) Amar does not grasp the meaning of her metaphorical speech; instead, she complains that of late “nobody will be direct, and that everything here is a smudge of hints and nudges” (20). In their second encounter, however, the Old Woman is much more outspoken, blaming Amar’s husband directly for her childlessness, which runs counter to the established, traditional view that the woman is always to blame. She openly invites her to live with her family and to copulate with her bachelor son, “with good strong blood” (50), who will give her children. Not surprisingly, Amar objects strongly to this proposal, saying: “Water can’t flow backwards, the moon can’t shine at noon. I have my honour”, while the Old Woman stresses: “These are modern times!” (50) As in Lorca’s *Yerma*, honour plays a significant role in Carter’s *A Yearning*. Amar’s Punjabi honour will not allow her to consider taking a lover. In fact, “[t]he displacement of [...] Asian women in arranged marriages, fertility, [...] makes this an especially, but not solely, female drama” as the Old Woman “tries to teach Amar that life is for living, not wasting in impossible desires” (Hoftijzer 1995:no page).

Like *Yerma* in Lorca’s play, Amar has now reached the nadir of her maddened despair, triggered by Jaz’s desire to “possess” her sexually as her master, to subdue her to his power. She “*clutches JAZ by the throat. [...] She sustains the pressure on his neck until she kills him*” (53). Indeed, she kills the husband who would not allow her to lead her own life, who would leave her “barren forever” (54). *A Yearning* presents “[t]his violent rebellion

of the colonized ‘other’” as the only alternative to a life of domestic subjugation” (Aston 1999:250-1).

3. Conclusion

As in Lorca’s play, Amar’s tragedy transcends her failure to conceive, being rooted chiefly in her frustration as a woman suffocated by her husband and the community. She can only liberate herself from these metaphorical shackles by taking the life of her oppressor. Another alternative to a desolate life would have been to take her own life. Patel (1998:263) refers to the high suicide rate among Asian women between the ages of 16 and 35 in Britain, which is three times the national average.

I would like to conclude by reproducing to the words of another suffocated Asian wife, Kiranjit Ahluwalia, who was sentenced to prison in 1989 for the murder of her husband:

My culture is like my blood [...] It is the culture into which I was born and where I grew up which sees the women as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour and glory, she is taught to endure many kinds of oppression and pain, in silence. In addition, religion also teaches her that her husband is her God and fulfilling his every desire is her religious duty. A woman who does not follow this part in our society has no respect or place in it. [...] I have come out of the jail of my husband and entered the jail of the law.

“Ahluwalia’s words might well serve as an epilogue for Amar after the “killing” of her husband. In life and in dramatic fiction, these two lawbreakers are testimony to the (violent) desperation and disempowerment that may be the hidden experience of some Asian women in their different (family) communities” (Aston 2003:140).

A Yearning, though written in a different space and time, in contemporary British Indian society, illustrates that the domination and disempowerment of women has continued since the presentation of *Yerma*, set in rural Spain in the 1930s.

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