

Portraits of Female Power in Argentina: Encarnación Ezcurra and Eva Perón

The last three decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a boom in writings on Latin American women to the left of the political spectrum. When considering the topic of leftist Argentine women in power, the image of Eva Perón is inescapable: she was the impoverished and illegitimate child from Los Toldos who went on to become Argentina's *Primera Dama*¹ and was worshipped by millions.

Eva's character, motives, and historical relevance have been debated by historians and writers: she still remains a polarising figure in Argentina, where she is deemed both a saint who alleviated the lives of the masses, and an 'avaricious prostitute' by members of the oligarquía², such as the renowned Argentine intellectual, Jorge Luis Borges.³ But one quality that all seem to agree upon is that she was an immensely powerful and ambitious figure who had a unique affinity with the Argentine proletariat and remains the most influential of cultural icons.

Eva has been the subject of extensive biographical and literary treatment: there are numerous accounts of her personal and political life, the most popular and historically accurate being those of Fraser and Navarro and Dujovne Ortiz⁴ who incorporate the use of existing historical documentation to support their arguments. However, similar to her husband Juan Perón, there is a dearth of evidence in relation to Eva's upbringing, childhood, and claim to fame. This has naturally encouraged authors to adopt a creative approach when writing about Eva, thus blurring the line between fact and fiction. The most critically acclaimed fictional account is Tomas Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* (1995), which tells the story of the 20-year odyssey of Eva's embalmed body.

It is because of Eva's rather obscure background that she has received mass attention in the fictional sphere, but in turn, her revolutionary feminist accomplishments have been somewhat overlooked in the historical realm. She is thought of as a mythical saint but her

¹ 'First Lady'.

² The Argentine upper class.

³ Gwendolyn Díaz, *Women and Power in Argentine Literature: Stories, Interviews, and Critical Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), pp.1-2.

⁴ For further reading, please see N Fraser & M. Navarro, *The Real Lives of Eva Perón* (London: Deutsch, 1980) and Alicia Dujovne-Ortiz, *Eva Perón* (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 1996).

heroine-like status stems from her ground-breaking practical achievements: she passed the bill for women's right to vote in 1947, as well as enforcing universal health care for the poor.

Although Eva – a left-wing political activist – has been crowned the unofficial queen of the masses, there is very little mention of more conservative women leaders who also exercised great power. Women involved in right-wing political movements and dictatorships have been largely ignored and excluded from the official historical discourse, which has been 'much to the detriment of a more nuanced understanding of women in politics in Latin America'.⁵

Notable female political figures on the right have been erased from Argentine history which has arguably hindered 'our understanding of the development of dictatorship and authoritarianism in Latin America'.⁶ One of the most prominent more conservative female political figures was Encarnación Ezcurra de Rosas, the wife of the infamous Federalist dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. González and Kampwith argue that 'the stories of both right- and left-wing women challenge the traditional portrayals of men as inherently violent and women as inherently peaceful'.⁷

This is precisely the outcome when considering Encarnación's important contribution to her husband's regime: she was partly responsible for organising and managing the *mazorca* death squad and meeting with army generals in Rosas's absence, pursuing an active role in the male-dominated political arena.

Both Encarnación and Eva were mocked for their appearance and apparent lack of intellect: Encarnación was the subject of profound contempt among the Unitarian⁸ community and was scorned for her fealdad,⁹ based on her masculine appearance. Similarly, Eva was scrutinised by the oligarquía for her flamboyant fashion, and dubious former profession as a prostitute and actress. Considering the conflict between women on the left and right forces us to confront the reality that 'there is no automatic sisterhood between women, even among those of the same class and ethnicity'.¹⁰

⁵ Victoria González and Karen Kampwith (eds). *Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p.1.

⁶ González and Kampwith, p.1.

⁷ González and Kampwith, p.1.

⁸ Unitarians were the opposing political party to the Federalists in the Argentine Civil War.

⁹ Spanish for 'ugliness'.

¹⁰ González and Kampwith, p.1.

For example, Encarnación helped working class and black women regain their place in the Argentine social hierarchy whereas so-called enlightened Unitarian ‘liberals’ discriminated heavily against ethnic minorities. White Unitarian women openly detested Rosas and Encarnación for their barbaric conduct and unprecedented violence that their government inflicted on the nation. One of Eva’s fierce opponents, Victoria Ocampo, was the grand dame of letters and founder of the celebrated journal *Sur* who launched herself into writing to expose what she saw as the deleterious effects of Peronism on Argentine society in the 1940s, only to be persecuted subsequently by the Peróns for her status as a member of the elite.

Despite women’s different political affiliations, the renowned writers (Gorriti¹¹ and Ocampo) and political figures (Encarnación and Eva) have something in common: they blur the socially imposed gender norms and emerge as empowered, independent, and influential women in patriarchal societies, reminding us of their similarities ‘even across immense political divisions’.¹²

Whereas Juan and Eva Perón subscribed to progressive social policies and championed the interests of the working classes, we cannot classify Encarnación and Rosas as out and out right-wingers given that they gave the ethnic minorities political agency and thus challenged racist Unitarian attitudes. Rosas and Perón showed how the working classes could be easily manipulated and used for political gain no matter if the leader was on the political left or right.

By contrast to Eva, Encarnación Ezcurra has received minimal attention in literary and historical spheres. While Perón’s jealous military colleagues, along with the Church, felt threatened by Eva’s efforts as they thought she damaged Perón’s image, Rosas’s comrades were forever grateful to Encarnación. In his letter to Rosas in 1833, the Argentine lawyer and Federalist politician Manuel Maza¹³ commends Encarnación by recognising her efforts to sustain the *paradigma rosista*: ‘Your wife is the heroine of the century: disposition, tenacity,

¹¹ Juana Manuela Gorriti was the first woman writer to contribute to the Unitarian literary resistance against Rosas, which was initially a male-dominated cohort consisting of established scholars Echeverría, Mármol, Alberdi, and Sarmiento.

¹² González and Kampwith, p.1

¹³ Manuel Maza was put to death in 1839 after the discovery of a failed plot to kill Rosas.

courage, energy displayed in all predicaments and on all occasions; her example was enough to galvanise support.¹⁴

The only account which focuses solely on Encarnación's importance is Vera Pichel's *Encarnación Ezcurra: La mujer que inventó a Rosas* (1990). Despite Encarnación's prominence, Ana Toscano suggests that in her last days, she was marginalised by her illness.¹⁵ Pichel corroborates this claim by implying that despite Rosas's hero-worship of his wife, he turned his attention to his adolescent daughter, Manuela, to assume the role of chief political mediator.

Similar to Eva, Encarnación refrained from staying at home to rest and instead remained politically active until her death. Both women inverted the gender norm in society at the time by assuming what was stereotypically thought of as a male profession and made a significant contribution to their husband's political successes.

Although both Encarnación and Eva attracted female enemies from opposing classes, it is their male counterparts who go to greater lengths to vilify them. They have been demonised by Unitarian/liberal male writers for their lack of education and their vulgarity: Encarnación was heavily and irrationally criticised by the Unitarian neo-classical poet, Tomás de Iriarte for her masculine physiognomy and lack of education: 'she is a vulgar woman, without morals or customs. She has learnt the ways of barbaric and degraded men'.¹⁶

Critics ranging from William Harbinson to Jorge Luis Borges have vilified Eva Perón's meteoric rise to global fame by claiming that her egotism and ruthlessness were the real motives underlying her accomplishments, as she possessed an insatiable thirst for

¹⁴ R Morgan's translation from Spanish: 'Tu esposa es la heroína del siglo: disposición, tesón, valor, energía desplegada en todos los casos y en todas las ocasiones; su ejemplo era bastante para electrizar y decidirse'. A letter from Maza to Rosas (11/11/1833), reprinted in Ernesto H. Celesia, *Rosas, aportes para su historia* (Buenos Aires: Alpe, 1954), p.442.

¹⁵ 'Encarnación no supo controlar la soledad y el vacío que le dejó la falta de actividad en los asuntos políticos del gobierno'. Ana-María Toscano, 'La reescritura de Encarnación Ezcurra en la ficción y la historia argentina en las últimas décadas', *Ex aequo de Revisita de Associação Portuguesa de Estudos sobre as Mulheres*, Vol. 17, (17), (2008), p.31.

¹⁶ R Morgan's translation from the Spanish: 'Mujer vulgar, sin educación ni costumbres, se puso en contacto con los hombres oscuros y degradados'. María Sáenz-Quesada, *Mujeres de Rosas* 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Penguin Random House Editorial Argentina, 2012), p.84.

power.¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges dismisses Eva as *esa mujer* (*that woman*). As late as 1980, Borges claimed that she was ‘a common prostitute, who had a brothel near Junín’.¹⁸

Borges also repeated the anti-Peronist joke that circulated when the legislature of the province of Buenos Aires was debating whether to change the name of the city of La Plata to Eva Perón: ‘Why so much discussion between La Plata and Eva Perón?’ Why don’t they call it *La Pluta*?¹⁹ Borges creates a vulgar metaphor, amalgamating *La Plata* and *puta*, the Spanish word for prostitute.

Male writers’ efforts to belittle these women conform to the Hispanic concept of *Marianismo*, which refers to how men, if not able to control women’s ‘powers’, become fearful of the ‘dangerous’ and ‘threatening’ influence that women can have on society. Throughout time, anthropological studies have propagated the conception that powerful women arouse fear in certain societies, particularly those influenced by religion. Julie Taylor identifies the customs that encompass *Marianismo*, stating that women and female deities present the constant threat of their power spiraling out of control and transforming into a malevolent force. However, their power can be benevolent only when subjected to patriarchal control.²⁰

This is relevant to Encarnación and Eva in the sense that, given the Catholic value system that infiltrates all Hispanic cultures, both women were and still are judged against the paradigm of *Marianismo* and its accompanying ideals and virtues. Taylor argues that the myths surrounding Eva not only correspond to the Argentine standards of womanhood, but to the multicultural perceptions of womanhood, concentrating on the ‘mysterious’ powers often associated with women pertaining to their ability to give birth, and their potentially ‘destructive’ authority if unregulated by a patriarchal social system.

Both Encarnación and Eva can be deemed female political revolutionaries of their time: ‘Each plotted, directed and policed the public’s idolatry. Each walked eagerly where

¹⁷ William A. Harbinson, *Eva Perón: Saint or Sinner?* (London: Boxtree, 1996), p.34.

¹⁸ R Morgan’s translation from the Spanish: ‘una prostituta común. Ella tenía un prostíbulo cerca de Junín’. Fermín Chávez, *Eva Perón: Sin Mitos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Theoría, 1996), p.121.

¹⁹ Laura Dail, *Evita: In My Own Words* (New York: The New Press, 1996), p.11.

²⁰ R Morgan’s translation and paraphrasing from the Spanish: ‘La mujer y las deidades femeninas presentan la amenaza constante de que su poder se descontrola y se transforma en una fuerza maléfica. Ante la ausencia de una autoridad masculina, con frecuencia la del consorte, se teme que la mujer despliegue destrucción y violencia a su alrededor. Pero su poder puede ser benevolente cuando somete su poder al control masculino’. Julie M. Taylor, *Eva Perón: the Myths of a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.16.

their men feared to tread'.²¹ Their real-life accomplishments are often overlooked when they were, in fact, of paramount importance to both their husbands' lasting political impact, and both championed women's political empowerment.

²¹ Fleur Cowles, *Bloody Precedent: The Perón Story* (London: Fredrick and Muller, 1952). p.10.

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