**I, WORST OF ALL: A REVIEW ON THE FILM OF SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ**

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*I, Worst of All* is a film written and directed by Maria Luisa Bemberg about the poet Juana Inés de la Cruz’ life in seventeenth-century colonial Mexico. She is favoured by the Spanish Viceroyalty of Mexico, who vows to protect her poetry as long as they reign, which reinforces the Church’s dislike of her engaging in poetry. The archbishop however, fails to recognize the beauty of poetry because of its deviation from the Bible’s teachings, and schemes his way into portraying Juana as a heretic. The Church hierarchy betrays her trust by publishing her interpretation of the Bible, and Juana is threatened by the Holy Spanish Inquisition. At the end, she repents for the sins that she committed and accepts the penance of giving up all worldly possessions and to live in solitude. Throughout this film, the tension between the Roman Catholic Church and the Colonial Spanish state Mexico affects the society in which Juana lives and Juana herself in three ways: the portrayal of class and ethnicity, the power of patriarchy, and ultimately the struggle between reason and faith. Such themes in *I, Worst of All* represents Bemberg’s interpretation of the influence of the Church in colonial Mexico. She personifies her own feminist ideals by intertwining the historical events within in the convent and illuminating her voice through Juana’s compelling character. Bemberg also purposely conveys the Church as a radical voice of fundamentalism within Christianity to highlight the contrasting passion of Juana’s liberal views of women’s liberation with the religiously-deemed misogyny of Catholic authority.

The tension between the Church and state is the most prominent power struggle of the time, as reflected in this film. According to Teresa Meade in *A History of Modern Latin America*, “the Crown vied for absolute control over the realm with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church
[…] [whom] represented the second arm of Spanish authority, overlapping and interpenetrating with the state.”¹ From the beginning of the film, the representation of this power conflict is shown when the Viceroy makes a toast with the archbishop and the archbishop does not drink from his glass. This is interpreted as defying the words and notions of the Viceroy, which identifies disagreement amongst the two. This strain resides throughout, where many scenes exemplify the Viceroyalty to have more power than high positions of the Church. Many of these incidences happen when the Viceroyalty defends Juana and poetry. The Viceroy disputes with the archbishop for taking away Juana’s books, which can be understood as a way of ‘declaring war’ against the Viceroy. The archbishop, on the other hand, denies this accusation for going against the Viceroy’s wishes. Both instances depict the dominating power of the state over the Church, and the Church’s struggle to stand its ground. Bemberg greatly recreates this strain of power through the attitudes the characters express in the film, and the loyalty that each character displays in this battle.

Yet, towards the climax of the film, it is revealed that the Monsignor of the convent betrays Juana by illicitly publishing her critiques of a theologian’s work. The archbishop’s authority within the Church is showcased here, since Juana’s untimely publication is part of his scheme to manipulate Juana to no longer fuel her intellectual appetite. Father Miranda— Juana’s confessor, along with the Monsignor— both stand in solidarity with the archbishop’s assertion of such command. No political intervention is available to Juana, igniting the ongoing Church and state power struggle. Juana’s forceful choice to repent for her sins reflects that “the Catholic Church has been viewed as a legitimizing agent of the state, and the existing order in Mexico,

Despite periods of historical antagonism.” The Church demonstrates its strength of leadership in attempts to take over the state by inducing its doctrines as appropriate actions of moral justice.

Class and ethnicity are commonly linked with one another, where both influence the hierarchal relationship of characters in the film. The Mexican natives are shown as of a lower status than the Spaniards, deeming them of a lesser importance as characters and therefore as a people. The only characters of colour are dwarf entertainers at the royal court who are of little importance, and a fellow nun in the convent, Josefa. She is the only nun that comforts Juana when the archbishop forbids her access to her books, and is someone [the viewer can assume] that Juana felt comfortable around. Josefa and the entertainers are only briefly shown. Both parties are depicted as being from a lower class, because Josefa is dressed differently than the other nuns, and the performers are hired solely to amuse the Vicereine. Not another face of ethnic diversity is seen, which further depicts how Spain transformed Mexico into land of their own. The setting of a Roman Catholic convent on conquered land with only Spanish nuns and the Vicereine’s use of characters of colour at their expense illustrate the little value the Spaniards place on Native-Mexicans. Bemberg’s attention to these particular details tie in the overall feel of the relations toward people in colour in seventeenth-century Mexico.

Patriarchy is a critical theme in the film, and specifically reflects various pressures, attitudes and opportunities of the Golden Age era. In the beginning of the film, a meeting between the archbishop, Sister Ursula, the abbess of the convent and a fellow nun occurs. While talking to the archbishop, both nuns have their entire heads and faces covered with a veil and are on a lower platform than the archbishop. This gives the impression that the nuns are of lower status than the archbishop, due to their lower ranking in the Church hierarchy and because they

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are women. In addition, women are not allowed to become archbishops, solely based on the fact that they are women, enforcing the patriarchal dominance within the Church.

The misogynistic archbishop represents the persecutor because of his enforcement of the Catholic doctrine that supresses women throughout the convent. Part of his successful scheme is to include the bishop in deceiving Juana to interpret the Bible, and then to publish her thoughts in opposition to a worshipped theologian. His irritation and ignorance towards Juana’s actions are exposed when he scolds Father Miranda for “trust[ing] the sound judgement of a woman”\textsuperscript{3}, since it was he who guides Juana on the literary path. This turning point in the film is where Juana replies: “if I weren’t a woman, my theological impertinence would not matter”\textsuperscript{4}. The archbishop counters this by exclaiming that “God didn’t create women to philosophize”\textsuperscript{5}. His statement boldly reveals his domineering attitude towards women and demonstrates the influence of patriarchy in his opinions. In spite of this, Juana asks the archbishop “Where is that written? What ‘revelation’ authorizes you to exclude women from knowledge?”\textsuperscript{6} The archbishop refuses to answer this question, and utters with disgust “I haven’t come here to listen to the impertinence of a bastard”\textsuperscript{7}. The fact that the archbishop did not have a direct answer to Juana’s thought-provoking question further shows how men and the Church thought of women. This conversation causes an immense unsettlement between Juana and the Church, and is part of the reason why she is influenced to seek the type of person God supposedly wants her to be in order to be a faithful nun. Bemberg exceptionally reconstructs the topic of patriarchy throughout the film, and reveals the struggles women have with the Catholic Church hierarchy.

\begin{footnotes}
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
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Along with such problems, Juana deals with the inner conflict of reason and faith. The creative perspective that she gains from reading literature, writing elaborate poetry, and engaging in scientific revolutions, which are the practical aspects in her life, openly oppose the expectations, responsibilities and overall faithfulness expected of a sister in the convent. Throughout the movie, reason is associated with the state and faith is associated with the Church, which reinforces the tension between the Church and state. This is evident when the Vicereine tells Juana that she is “more poet than a nun, more nun than a woman“8. Juana is remarkably expressive, and uses literature and poetry to satisfy her intellectual appetite since she cannot receive an education. However, the idea of poetry is not compatible with the duties of a nun since such philosophical ideals could not intertwine with theology. As a result, Juana makes a conscious effort to prevent this from happening. She also does not care for the love or marriage a woman would have with a man, which shows her strength and independence. Towards the end of the film, the struggle of logic and inquiry against piety and virtue is the cause of Juana’s mental defeat. In the end, her supposed lack of devotion brings her to the penance of isolation from worldly possessions. After repenting for her sins before the Inquisition, Juana signs her letter of confession with “Yo, la peor de todas”, claiming herself to be the “worst of all women”. Bemberg decides to specifically use this quotation to show the impact of the patriarchal pressures Juana experiences as a woman, and the perceived unfaithful and disobedient actions she experiences as a nun in relation to the struggle with reason and faith. In the end, Juana cannot find a middle ground between the two and conforms to the expectations of a nun by living in isolation from what the world has to offer.

8. Ibid.
*I, Worst of All,* is a dramatic historical account of the life of Juana Inés de la Cruz, depicting the various issues that affect herself and the culture she lives in. The tension between the Church and the state prevails in the entire movie, and is apparent that there is a constant struggle for absolute authority within the convent. Though the state is successful in attaining the colonial ruling of Mexico, it can be said that the Church actually holds the power of moral authority. Carlos Fuentes, a leading intellect of twenty-first century Mexico articulates that “[he] can’t get away from [Catholicism]. It impregnates everything – [his] world view, [his] view of politics, [his] view of women, of education, of literature.”

The Church’s dogma is what guides an individual’s decisions, by enforcing its ethics, as exemplified by Juana’s repentance. The topic of class and ethnicity in the film are in direct relation with the Spaniards conquering the Native-Mexicans, portraying that those of an ethnic background in the film are considered to be part of a lower class, and those who look Spanish are considered to be part of a higher class. The patriarchal theme is visible in the majority of events that take place in the movie, and is blatantly shown during a conversation between the Church and Juana, where Juana is criticized for being a woman. Lastly, the inner conflict between reason and faith has to do with Juana’s choice between poetry and piety. The Church persistently seeks to reform Juana, eventually breaking her spirit. Bemberg’s representation of these themes depicts the true authority that patriarchy has among the people of the convent in the name of the Catholic Church. Her successful attempt to illustrate such infiltration is the reason Juana appears as a rebel with her feminist view of life. Catholicism has been able to maintain its religious and patriarchal influence in today’s society, even though nations are in state governance. Juana Inés de la Cruz is remembered as an influential, eloquent poet, and is exactly how she is expressed in this exceptional film. Today, she is considered to be one of the greatest poets of Spain’s Golden Age.

Bibliography

