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Spring 2019 Second Prize Essay

A STUDY OF *ODALISQUE IN PIECES*: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUITY IN A COMPILATION PIECE

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Many writing pieces that are a compilation of poems, short stories, or any other method of storytelling are not designed to be only understandable if read in order, but such is not the case for the poem compilation by Carmen Giménez Smith. Smith's *Odalisque in Pieces* contains poems about womanhood, understanding new things, accepting things that cannot be changed, etc. This is not a particularly revolutionary concept in its own right, but these poems are not meant to be read one at a time. There are four separate sections, each one dealing with progressively more mature themes. Book I expresses feelings of wonder, the desire to understand the world around as it can be seen, and struggling to accept things that cannot be changed, which are very childlike concepts. Book II discusses similar themes with a more mature approach. In this book the narrator shows feelings of wanting to make a change in her life but feeling constricted by society, and the early stages of encountering boys and love. These feelings are associated with adolescence. There is a major tone shift in book III. The narrator conveys a negative view on larger topics such as economics, the city structure, and a "he" character with an implied romantic relationship. This book represents the narrator's adulthood. Book IV shows themes of old age, such as an introspective view of the world, dwelling on the past, and physical aging. The continuity between each poem is the essence of the storytelling itself. Smith's purpose for writing this poetry collection is to illustrate the lives of Latin American women that are predestined by the gender roles imposed on them, and she does this by structuring the poems in *Odalisque in Pieces* to sum up to one unique and individual story about a woman going through the stages of life: from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood, to death.

Carmen Gimenez Smith is of Latin American decent, and Latin American culture and themes attached to it are prevalent in *Odalisque in Pieces*, such as marriage and death. Marriage is important in Latin American culture, and the idea is imposed onto young Latin American girls from a young age. Marital satisfaction is often heavily correlated with a woman's worth, which leads to women over exerting themselves to keep their husbands content, whether it is domestic, sexual, or both (Helms 1). The narrator reflects on these cultural themes in books II and III, in the sense that she does not want to totally devote herself to a husband, but rather live her life by her own guidelines. It also implies the severity of failing to keep a husband happy or ending a marriage on bad terms. The way the narrator speaks of her supposed marriage shows that she keeps such an idea in mind. In some poems, she uses the term "husband" to be a symbol for things she has committed herself to. Another respected and celebrated concept in Latin American culture that is very symbolic is the concept of death. This is represented by the Mexican holiday *Dia de Muertos*, which means "Day of the Dead." There are a lot of ideas surrounding death in Latin American culture. One popular idea is that death is a symbol of equality that was used during times of Spanish conquest. No matter how poorly natives were treated, they recognized the one thing that made them equal to the conquistadors; they all would die. Death is not seen as an honorable military virtue as it is in most cultures, but rather something everyone experiences because they are hu-

man (Glenn 2). It is not as serious of an event in Latin American culture as in most, which is why it is not looked at so grimly. In the end of book IV, the narrator does not lose sleep over the event that will be her death, but rather takes the time to think about the life she has lived, similar how in Dia de Muertos, the lives of those who died are celebrated, rather than mourning over their death in the first place. Throughout *Odalisque in Pieces*, Smith makes it clear not only how prevalent these cultural norms are in her life, but also how profoundly they shape her life, and in some cases she goes as far as to challenge them.

The poems in book I of *Odalisque in Pieces* represent the feelings and emotions of a child. The opening poem, "Photo of a Girl on a Beach" is an introspective piece filled with symbolism and metaphor. The title itself functions as an indicator of the theme. The imagery of looking back on old photos is usually associated with reminiscing about one's childhood. The first stanza of the poem reads, "Once when I was harmless/ and didn't know any better" (Smith 1-2). These words have connotations of innocence and feeling small in the grand scheme of things, which are qualities that are associated with childhood. Being that this is a retrospective reading, the reader will be able to look back at this line after reading the story and understand why the narrator looks back so fondly on her lost innocence and childlike insignificance. The entry "Tree Tree Tree" uses the frame of childish games to speak of how children learn about the world as they grow up. The narrator tells of a game she plays called tree tree tree, where she "repeats a word until it ceases to mean" (Smith 2). The act of playing games like this is a childlike act in itself, but the deeper meaning of the poem has themes of being able to learn about the effect of words, which is a lesson people learn during childhood. Smith writes "Trees give nothing, not even a sound,// Our tongue made branches move" (Smith 8-9). The narrator learns that the effect of words is strong enough to shake even a tree. Later in the story, when the narrator desires such strength, the reader will see the narrator resorting to the use of words to give her the feeling of power. Unfortunately, the childhood that Smith portrays is not all fond memories and useful life lessons.

As *Odalisque in Pieces* develops past book I, it becomes evident that the themes are generally dark and negative, but the root of these themes lie in the narrator's childhood. The narrator talks about her father, and alcoholism. The entry "How It's Told" portrays the narrator in her bed trying to sleep, but staying awake because her drunken father is up late making a ruckus. The narrator says from her bed, "I saw my father stop,/ empty his gut/ next to the open door" (Smith 6-8). The narrator describes what is happening in basic language, which enforces the fact that she is a child. Describing vomiting as "emptying the gut" is a juvenile way of doing so, but her mundane attitude towards this event is very telling of the situation. It suggests that she knows exactly what is going on, which indicates that her father has a history of alcoholism. Any type of neglect or abuse of children, from simple family dysfunctionality to physical abuse affect the psychological development of children for their years of growing up and even into adulthood. These issues include failure to develop sufficient self esteem and the lack of ability to form trustworthy bonds with men (Natarajan 221). Readers can speculate the lack of distrust towards men will deeply affect the narrator's search for a husband. We can see these affects starting to work very quickly as Smith goes on in Book II to speak of her adolescence.

The themes and feelings expressed in book II are similar to the themes in book I, but more evolved and viewed from a different perspective, as if these thoughts were thought by the same person at different stages of life. The first four poems of book II share a motif of moths, and uses imagery of them floating around, sitting still the way they do, and dying. Within the first poem, "Girl Moth," there is another title, **Handmaid Moth**. This implies the content of this poem is a poem itself; a poem written by the narrator. The moth poems seem like an odd shift in focus before it returns to the narrative of the girl's life, but the idea that they were written by the narrator explains the subsection of poems and how they fit into the timeline. Adolescence is a time when people start to find hobbies they are passionate about

and start practicing them, and poetry is a common outlet for young people to express strong feelings or to speak on their trauma. It is understandable that the narrator would look to poetry, the artistic use of words, for such an outlet, being that she learned the strength of words in her childhood, and she wants to feel power over her past. Trauma and generally negative emotions are prevalent in the moth poems. For example, in "Luna Moth," the narrator says, "Frog, vanity, automobile, flattened palm, pinch, and water.// I was death to begin with" (Smith 5-7). Frogs, cars, water, and the other things she mentions earlier in the poems like newspapers and pesticide are things that kill moths, which is why she states she was "dead to begin with." Feelings of being insignificant and mundanely put down by things that are bigger, like a person from a moth's perspective or society from a teenager's perspective, are common emotions that adolescents experience. Another thing that the narrator could be feeling constantly put down by is the memories of her father. Victims of any type of domestic abuse suffer from long-lasting psychological effects rooted in feeling like their freedom and integrity are taken away (Natarajan 457). A person's feelings of being trapped in society and having minimal control over her life are tied to their sense of freedom and integrity. As book II progresses from the subset of poems written by the narrator back to the narrative of her life, the narrator's experience through adolescence are shown in a different way.

As book II continues, Smith continues to convey feelings of sadness, discontent with life, and more generally negative emotions, which plague many people throughout the entirety of adolescence. The approach to conveying these themes are different than the first part of book II as a result of the change in perspective, and are shown using similar means as book I. The poem "Pillow Talk" reads, "Listen, I got here/ the same way you did,// taking heart in a stranger/ who plucked music from my pudendum," (Smith 11-14). The first clause represents an existential on society. Everyone is brought into the world the same way, they are simply brought into existence with no explanation. In the midst of the existential confusion, others whom the narrator does not know or is not close takes advantage of some way, indicated by how she feels her body is open to strangers to freely exploit. Strangers need not be strangers in the traditional sense, but rather people that the narrator does not accept as positive important figures in her life, like greater society, or her father. These feelings of being thrown into the world and taken advantage of by others once again reinforces the idea of having no control over one's own life. While so far focusing inwardly on her sense of self, Smith changes to more outward feelings of adolescence. In the entry "Cities, I Still Love You," the evident themes are about fitting into society and exactly was society is in the grand scheme of things. Smith writes, "The monument: We cleaned ourselves in its genesis,/ and left it up because, come on, like it wasn't hollow, a spectacle not meant for the museums we start like families" (3-5). This speaks in the same existential tone prevalent in "Pillow Talk." This time it is in the sense that the city was nothing but a hollow patch of land until humans made it what they are today. Smith then writes, "O this pittsburgh, its hallucination of throwing a drink in the west's face. That's where I kept us," (Smith 6-7). The city of Pittsburgh is a lot further west than Smith's birthplace of New York City, both in a geographical sense and a personal sense. This line speaks to how small not only people, but also cities are in the grand scheme of things, as Pittsburgh is throwing a "drink in the west's face": a west that is an enormous vast ocean when compared the transition from the Mid-Atlantic cities of New York and Pittsburgh. As book III begins, the narrator demonstrates how the feelings of adolescence transform into broader topics with greater importance and how they are viewed with more mature a mind.

As adolescence turns into adulthood, some struggles are resolved and many are looked at through a different lens, which the narrator experiences throughout book III. Lack of control over her own life was one of the struggles the narrator described in her adolescence, and the opening poem of book III, "Fortune: A Conversation," is about how the narrator overcame that feeling. The poem reads "When you pause there to look in on you,// a discovery is made/" (Smith 12-13). It goes further to say, "Take this hind-

sight like a wallet/ of cash, exchange it for the local currency,/ you endless inversion. You optimist" (17-19). The narrator finds the solution to her long standing issue of not having enough control over her life by looking in at herself, and uses that newly found solution to begin achieving her own goals. The control over life she sought for in adolescence can only be achieved by herself. Taking control of one's own life and living on one's own accord is the very essence of adulthood. The last words, "you optimist," is said in an almost mocking tone. In an otherwise uplifting poem, this line and the tone in which it is delivered points out the fact that only a fool would believe that taking one's life in their own hands will always yield positive results. The narrator is no fool though; she realizes that will the ability to take control of one's own life and improve it comes with the possibility of making one's own life worse. While this is mature and logical thinking rather than dramatic adolescent drivel, the narrator continues to never ignore the negative side of a positive situation. Many would consider this a useful life skill. Unfortunately for the narrator, not all of the problems stemming from her adolescence are resolved so cleanly in adulthood. The bulk of book III deals with one of the most important things in the lives of most people, which is their marriage. Throughout book II, in poems such as "Pillow Talk," the narrator makes a few subtle nods to sexuality and the rare acknowledgement of the role of boys in her life. Knowing that marriage is very major part of the life of Latin American women, and there is the expectation to keep their husband happy, the narrator starts to face these feelings in adulthood. Throughout book III, the narrator makes many remarks of wanting to feel good enough for a husband, such as the line in "Eyelashes," "Will someone write me a proper response?" (Smith 9), or the line in "Solve for N," "A field of husbands dithered and stammered/ outside of my head" (Smith 4-5). The narrator's unorganized, fast paced, and overwhelming thoughts shows her being swept up and intimidated by the thought of acquiring a husband. Later in book IV, we are introduced to an unnamed character, referred to as "you" or "he." The implication is that this character is the narrator's husband, as indicated in lines throughout book III. For example, in "Why I Left," the line, "But one night I awoke with pain/ that divided me. I whimpered quietly and with shame./ To need and to want such loneliness. But he heard and/ held my belly like a sorcerer would" (Smith 7-10). The imagery of sleeping in the same bed every night refers to marriage. The lack of a name suggests how distant she feels from him. Not only are women expected to be subservient to men, Latin American men are pressured by society, so far as to associate it with their self worth, to be overly manly, which is associated with lack of will to make emotional connections (French 212). Being that the narrator has gone through trauma and holds such a negative outlook on life, she needs someone to support her emotionally, but this is not what her husband gives to her. This leads her marriage to be one of the less fulfilling stages of her life, as she deems it not worthy to even name the character. With some positive things and some negative things, the narrator's adulthood teaches her a new outlook to have on life, which she demonstrates as she grows old in book IV.

Compared to the other books, Book IV is a very straightforward and simple depiction of the elderly years and end of life, leading it to be the shortest of the four books. Because the understanding of death in Latin American is less tragic than that of other cultures, the thought of the narrator not making a big deal of her death should not come as a surprise. The first poem of book IV, "Vacation as Prelude" uses imagery to depict a character at the beach. For example, Smith writes, "The amniotic Pacific, years ago,/ brittle and gray as I gulped it/ when a wave took me under" (1-3). This poem is the first time beach related imagery is used since the opening of book I, "Photo of a Girl on a Beach." Reminiscing about the past, namely childhood, is a common theme used when describing the elderly years, but the tone of this poem is different from "Photo of a Girl on a Beach." "Photo of a Girl on a Beach" was a happy and whimsical depiction of childhood, while the aforementioned stanza in "Vacation as Prelude" depicts a darker, more gloomy setting. The poem ends with "In drowning,/ literal, metaphorical,/ a friend said today,/ one lets go

of will,/ or becomes the shrapnel of it” (Smith 18-22). The reader is given the continued image of drowning and fate, both used to describe that which cannot be avoided; in this case, death. Book IV continues with similar imagery of death, the idea of leaving forever, and growing old until the change of pace that is seen in the final poem, called “Idea in a Ruinous State.” This poem opens up with, “Only the flutter of an idea./ Only an absolute that throws off the cloak of mooniness/ to reveal that she never was or never will be” (Smith 1-3). While existential in prose, this is the first time Smith has written with a somewhat happy tone since Book I. While book IV and most of *Odalisque in Pieces* is quite sad, someone calling themselves a flutter of an idea, or something that never existed to begin with is an oddly positive way to look at life. Perhaps at the very end, people get the sense of how small they are and their life is in the grand scheme of things. Either way, that is how the narrator described the peaceful end of her life.

The narrative that Carmen Giménez Smith leaves the reader with is filled with themes that heavily suggest chronology, but it goes even further to highlight how people who suffer hardships grow up and deal with those hardships. The reader sees how the narrator is able to deal with the negative relationship she has with her father and her disjointed marriage as she grows older. One of the major impressions this gives the reader is how outwardly evident it is that the narrator’s emotions become more grim as she stomachs all the events of her past. While it may seem that Smith has merely created a character and shares her story, this is not her intention. Observing the norms of Latin American culture that play a strong role in the narrator’s life, the life depicted in this collection is not meant to be Smith’s life herself, or a fictional character’s life, but rather the lives of countless women who are a part of Latin American culture. The importance of women’s subservience to men in marriage explains how the narrator’s father was able to continue his destructive ways, and it also explains how distant the narrator felt from her husband and how discontent with her marriage she was. Being that these norms are common across Latin American countries, Smith’s narrative shows the ways these social norms can cause unhealthy households and consequently emotionally damaged children, of which most are female. The phenomenon of social norms putting people down is not exclusive to Latin American women, but rather it can apply to all social norms. The fact that social norms that are held so strongly are not always wholesome cultural values, but can rather be primitive practices that were never improved as human society developed. Breaking down social norms like the gender roles Smith highlights in *Odalisque in Pieces* is a long fought uphill battle, but demonstrating the negative effects they can have on a person’s life is a sufficient start to doing so.